

ECUMENICAL CONCERN
FROM AN ANABAPTIST PERSPECTIVE:
THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH
IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN HOWARD YODER

by

Aiden John Schlichting Enns

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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AIDEN JOHN SCHLICHTING ENNS

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Aiden John Schlichting Enns

Department of Religion, University of Manitoba, 1995

Advisor: Egil Grislis

Abstract

This thesis offers a comprehensive introduction to the concept of the church in the thought of John Howard Yoder. The church in the thought of this Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian and ethicist lives its existence as a social sub-group in the midst of the wider society to demonstrate what relations in society should be. The thesis shows how Yoder's ecclesiology can establish a credible relation to the state and wider society. This concept of the church also provides direction for ecumenical dialogue. Yoder has demonstrated that it is possible to respect one's ecumenical neighbour without necessarily agreeing with everything he or she says. He has shown that maintaining one's particularity at the discussion table enhances the quest for Christian unity.

Yoder's theology is one which gives concrete examples of how the local congregation should function in terms of governance and polity. In his exposition of Matthew 18 and his explanation of the phrase "binding and loosing" he gives a prescription for dealing with church conflict. Yoder's theology ties the ecclesial community to the sacred scriptures in a way that it grants the scriptures authority, but does not make them and

their precepts immovable. The scriptures are seen as the living memory of a believing community. In relation to history, Yoder lays forth an explanation of our times—namely that we are living between the ages: the old age before Christ when the principalities and powers had free reign, and the new age when these powers have been defeated in principle with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His manner of doing this is not one which devalues the present world, as some eschatologies do, but rather one which suggests the created order has inherent goodness—it is the powers that are in rebellion. The church (that is, local communities of confessing committed adults), by its very existence, challenges the institutions and structures in the fabric of our society that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

The thesis begins with a review of Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiologies by considering typologies presented by J.R. Burkholder, Leo Driedger and Rodney J. Sawatsky. Using Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church*, the remainder of the first chapter shows how Yoder's ecclesiology is similar to and yet different from models of the church as mystical communion, herald, sacrament, servant and institution.

The second chapter looks at the background and development of Yoder's concept of the church. It shows that from the outset, Yoder has sought to work out an ecumenical expression for his work in the church. Yoder caught the "Anabaptist Vision" from his mentors at Goshen College, Indiana. In Europe, Yoder became part of the new scholarly interest in restoring the vision of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Yoder was not content, however, to share this vision with only his denomination, he has sought to bring his message to the wider Christian community. This chapter also shows how Yoder has wrestled with the influence of Karl

Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. The final section asks the question: is Yoder's ecclesiology sectarian or churchly? This inquiry is necessary because of the common perception that Mennonites are a sect, a perception which Yoder has tirelessly sought to shatter. The chapter shows that Yoder's proposal can be seen as sectarian, but at the same time, it is no more sectarian than any other view of the church.

The third chapter presents Yoder's concept of the church in detail. It starts by comparing Yoder's views with H. Richard Niebuhr's classic book *Christ and Culture*. In some regards Yoder fits into Niebuhr's category where the church is against culture. But for the most part, Yoder's view is more like Niebuhr's own—Christ the transformer of culture. The chapter then presents seven marks of the church as can be seen in the thought of Yoder: discipleship, congregational centrality, authority of the Bible, separation from the world, missionary quality, Spirit-led, and ecumenicity. These seven attributes have become themes throughout the larger body of Yoder's writings.

The fourth chapter shows that Yoder's hermeneutic is shaped by his understanding of the church. He considers scripture itself to be the living memory of a church community. The text, which we now know as the Old New Testaments, has authority because it is the faithful record of that community, not because God somehow magically inspired some writers to produce timeless texts. Each community must interact with the Jesus story to discover what it means to be a faithful disciple in the contemporary setting. A definite strength of this view is that it accounts for the diversity found within the New Testament—each community was different, had different questions, and had its own selective memory. A weakness is that Yoder tolerates only the amount of diversity that falls within his own

concept of the canon. This chapter argues that this diversity can be expanded and therefore have a greater ecumenical impact. The chapter is divided into three parts: The first part discusses the meaning of the canon and outlines Yoder's presentation of three differing views, Catholic, Protestant, and modern. The second part discusses Yoder's own understanding of "canon." The third part is guided by four questions taken from an essay by Allen Verhey: What does one consider the canon to be? What questions do we ask of scripture? What do we understand when we understand scripture? and What is the role of other sources for doing ethics?

The fifth chapter deals with theological and ethical implications of Yoder's Anabaptist ecclesiology. Subjects such as incarnation, salvation, "the principalities and powers," and eschatology take on new meaning as they are used to define and describe the function and form of the ecclesial community. As a body of people who believe that Jesus was the Christ, the church effectively becomes the incarnation of Jesus in the world. Salvation comes to these people and the world around them as the barriers between and around them are broken down. These barriers can be broken down by Jesus's disciples because of what happened at the cross. Yoder says that Jesus's death and resurrection has in principle conquered the structures responsible for the evil in the world—the principalities and powers. The body of believers are to incarnate this victorious life in the transition time before the new age is fulfilled. The primary responsibility of an individual in this church is two-fold: decide to follow Jesus's teachings, and commit the whole self to the community of believers. This new community models a life for the non-believing world and invites them to join.

The sixth chapter deals with Yoder's ecumenical concern. Yoder has

struggled long and hard to make his minority voice heard among what might be called the Constantinian choruses. He has followed closely the developments of the World Council of Churches and other para-church bodies promoting church union. He has also formally participated in denominational dialogues. This final chapter casts a critical eye upon Yoder's theology of the church and his ecumenical concern. It outlines what Yoder understands by the term *ecumenical*. Then, after presenting the nature of his ecumenical concern, it considers some strengths and weaknesses. The last section concludes the thesis with some critical reflections.

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Ecumenical Concern From an Anabaptist Perspective:
The Concept of the Church in the Thought of John Howard Yoder

Introduction

The focus of this thesis will be the thought of an Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian and ethicist John H. Yoder, now teaching at the University of Notre Dame. For most of his career he has sought to prove that Anabaptist social ethics need not be sectarian or politically irresponsible. Yoder indicates that the ethic he is espousing is not a "radical" ethic, but what he calls "classical or catholic."¹ In other words, although he sees himself involved in a denomination that has its roots in the Radical Reformation, he is speaking to an ecumenical audience. His is a vision based on the Christian Scriptures and early church tradition. He can therefore say of one of his major books that "these pages do not describe a Mennonite vision. They describe a biblically rooted call to faith, addressed to Mennonites or Zwinglians, to Lutherans or Catholics, to unbelievers or other-believers."²

This thesis proposes that central to Yoder's thought are three basic concerns: first, that Yoder's theology has as its organizing principle the concept of the church as a gathered community of believers; second, that an essential part of Yoder's ecclesiology is his concern to speak ecumenically,

¹John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 8.

²Ibid.

hence not only to Mennonites, but also to the church at large; third, that the relationship between Yoder's ecclesiology and his ecumenical concern has a distinct flavour of its own. This thesis maintains that these creative insights have been placed in a generally traditional context, namely, that Yoder's definition of the church is faithful to the scriptures, employs many traditional insights, and often accepts the generally commonplace contemporary views.

Where the thesis is critical of Yoder is in the implementation of this concept of the church in the ecumenical arena. Whereas Yoder would use his concept of the church over against other views (such as Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran), this thesis will observe that this concept can be used to bring various views of the church alongside each other. Yoder sees the church primarily as a group of people gathered together at the local level around a common belief and commitment. Whereas Yoder would call people to an Anabaptist-Mennonite expression of the faith, this thesis suggests that parts of this view can be used to affirm the Christian faith in other groups. That is, Christian community, Bible reading, and social action can take place in a variety of churches, not just the ones rooted in Anabaptism.

The first chapter will serve as an introduction to the field of contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology. This survey will provide the context in which to place Yoder's ecclesiology. It will show that there are several different Mennonite theologies, and that Yoder's, unlike some others, is one that relies heavily on a clear distinction between the church and the world.

The second chapter will explore the roots of Yoder's ecclesiology. He grew up as a Mennonite, and had Mennonite academic mentors. He

quickly caught hold of the biblically-rooted vision of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. However, he was not content to share this with only the Mennonites. His agenda is to take this message to the wider church community.

The third chapter will present a detailed outline of this Anabaptist concept of the church. It will highlight the major features of Yoder's ecclesiology, such as congregational centrality and discipleship.

The fourth chapter deals with the topic of hermeneutics. Yoder's understanding of how to interpret the Bible is closely tied to his concept of the church as a community of disciples. For example, it is the community that is charged with the task of reading the scriptures and applying them to the contemporary situation. The canon is essentially a record of the believing community and its attempts to be faithful.

The fifth chapter deals with some of the implications of such an ecclesiology. Theological topics such as the incarnation and salvation take on new meanings as Yoder explains them: the church itself embodies the life of Christ, and is therefore called to live an alternate and new paradigmatic existence in the world. The focus of salvation is shifted from the individual and brought to the community. As the community experiences salvation, barriers among the group are broken down.

The sixth and final chapter analyzes Yoder's ecumenical concern. He moves in two directions: on the one hand, his ecclesiology is a model which can be used to bring Christians from other groups together. On the other hand, there are points at which Yoder's vision for the church can be broadened. The chapter will conclude with a series of critical reflections on Yoder's position.

Chapter 1

A Survey of the Field of Mennonite Ecclesiologies

Before launching into a discussion of the concept of the church in the thought of John Howard Yoder, it is important to understand the context in which he is writing. As we shall see, Yoder's is not the only voice in the fields of Mennonite theology and ethics. Instead of hearing one strong solo voice we hear a choir of different voices, some traditional and others progressive. In this chapter we will discover that among the several types and approaches to understanding the church in the Anabaptist tradition, Yoder's approach is quite traditional. Yet his vigorous application of the so-called orthodox doctrines to the contemporary scene makes his Anabaptist orthodoxy a serious challenge for all.

This chapter will demonstrate that there is a significant variety of Mennonite theologies. Secondly, it will explain the theological differences between the various ecclesiologies. It will do this through the use of the typologies presented in Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*.

A. Charting the Diversity

Many people have tried to chart the diversity of the theologies existing on the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scene. Some categorize the

groups according to differing central concepts,¹ others differentiate between various historical streams,² still others give consideration to sociopolitical positions,³ and finally some make their distinctions according to major church denominations.⁴ J.R. Burkholder, a prominent Mennonite theologian, has identified as many as ten different Mennonite theologies.⁵ Clearly the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite church is struggling with its identity.⁶

¹John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991), hereafter cited as *Mennonite Peace Theology*.

²For example see Leo Driedger, "The Peace Panorama: Struggle for the Mennonite Soul," a paper presented at the "Mennonite Peace Theology Into the 90s" colloquium held in Clearbrook, B.C. June 21-23, 1991. Copies available from Mennonite Central Committee offices in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

³See Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism," in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honour Of C.J. Dyck* (Scottsdale, Pa., Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992), 149-151.

⁴See J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, Pa., Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1975), and the follow-up study done from research conducted seventeen years later, J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991).

⁵J.R. Burkholder, "Can We Make Sense of Mennonite Peace Theology?" in *Mennonite Peace Theology*, 5-9. He places John H. Yoder in a category labelled as "The Pacifism of the Messianic Community."

⁶This is evidenced by the surge of literature on the topic. Consider the following examples: J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," *Conrad Grebel Review* 6,2 (Spring 1988): 119-145; A. James Reimer, "Toward a Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *Conrad Grebel Review* 6,2 (Spring 1988): 147-159; Rodney J. Sawatsky, "Defining 'Mennonite' Diversity and Unity," *Mennonite*

Walter Klaassen suggests that a turning-point in the understanding of early Anabaptist identity occurred in 1975.⁷ This is the year that Klaus Depperman, Werner Packull, and James M. Stayer published their article entitled "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins."⁸ They argued that Anabaptism had multiple beginnings in as many as three areas: Switzerland, South Germany, and the Netherlands. They stated that the religious expression of the Anabaptists in each of these areas was influenced by the different surroundings.⁹ Hence, we note that pluralism is a central concept in this interpretation of early Anabaptism.

This emphasis sought to combat the contradicting view promulgated by one of Yoder's chief mentors, Harold S. Bender (1897-1962). Bender had set forth an "Anabaptist Vision" which dominated the shape of Mennonite theology at the mid-point of the twentieth Century.¹⁰ The movement came to be known as the "Goshen School," and refers to the time when Bender

Quarterly Review 57 (July 1983): 282-292; Leo Driedger and Leland Harder, eds., *Anabaptist-Mennonite Identities in Ferment*, Occasional Papers No. 14 (Elkhart Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990); Hamm, "Mennonite Brethren Identity". A comprehensive overview is provided by John S. Oyer, "Anabaptist Historiography," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1990) vol. V, 378-382.

⁷Walter Klaassen, "The Quest for Anabaptist Identity," in *Anabaptist-Mennonite Identities in Ferment*, 14.

⁸*Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975): 83-121.

⁹Walter Klaassen, "The Quest for Anabaptist Identity," 14.

¹⁰See Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (1944): 3-24; reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67-88.

and his colleagues at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, launched a campaign of serious academic study in the area of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. They had intentions of better delineating a place for mid-twentieth-century Anabaptism. That is, they wanted to distinguish it from American fundamentalism and the influential theological liberalism. Bender argued that the origin of Anabaptism was pure, peaceful, and evangelical.¹¹ The historical revision begun by Depperman, et al., has held sway, however, and contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite historiography and theology is wrestling with pluralism and diversity. In fact, it is quite accurate to say that the (primarily North American) scholarly Mennonite world is in an identity crisis.¹² Mennonites are asking themselves who they are and what they believe.

Review of Various Typologies

How can the diversity be categorized? This question has bearing on our topic because we want to understand Yoder's theology, his ecclesiology in particular, in a broader Mennonite context.

Of the several attempts to categorize the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scene, the following three have been most persuasive: J.R. Burkholder, Leo Driedger, and Rodney J. Sawatsky. After reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of each, I will suggest a fourth model as one

¹¹For Bender's effect on Mennonite historiography see John S. Oyer's compact and comprehensive entry in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. V, "Anabaptist Historiography," 379-382. (This includes over three columns of bibliography, which he calls "only a few representative samples"! More about the "Goshen School" and its effects on Yoder is given in chapter 2.

¹²See Calvin W. Redekop and Samuel Steiner, eds., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1988).

which further illuminates the differences in ecclesiology. This review will help us understand the context of Yoder's work.

Burkholder's Ten-Fold Typology.¹³ Although Burkholder identified different peace theologies, his study has bearing upon our topic of ecclesiology because beneath each peace theology lies a certain understanding of the church—its nature, mission, and mode of interaction with the world. His ten types are as follows: historic nonresistance, "apolitical" nonresistance, radical pacifism, the pacifism of the messianic community, political pacifism (political nonviolence or realist pacifism), post-political pacifism (neo-sectarian pacifism), social responsibility, liberation pacifism, nonviolent statesmanship, and Canadian pacifism.

Burkholder's classification is helpful for a variety of reasons. Briefly, the merits of this typology are as follows: these are current positions; others are familiar with his typology; and he identifies specific individuals with each type. There are, however, weaknesses in his typology as well: his categories are almost as diverse as the different individuals doing peace theology (we therefore must ask if this is truly a taxonomy or merely a list); the ten types may be reduced to a smaller number;¹⁴ and finally, his typology ignores the important socio-historical background of the Mennonites. This last factor plays a large role in the following attempt at categorization.

¹³J.R. Burkholder, "Can We Make Sense of Mennonite Peace Theology?" in *Mennonite Peace Theology*, 5-9.

¹⁴For example, "social responsibility" and "Canadian pacifism" may fall under one heading—the only significant difference Burkholder gives is that one is Canadian the other is not.

Driedger's 2-Fold Typology. Leo Driedger, the prominent scholar of the sociology of Mennonites, prefers to place the various Mennonite peace theologies into their respective streams of social history.¹⁵ He believes that he has produced a more "deductive dynamic model" which shows that there are "two major socio-historical Swiss Sectarian and Dutch Activist streams beginning in rural enclaves, moving toward increased urban pluralism."¹⁶ The church in the Swiss Sectarian model is prone to exercise more social withdrawal and separation from politics. The church in the Dutch Activist model is inclined to be more culturally engaged, being more "interested in responsible participation in the larger society from a 'Gemeindechristentum' [Christian community] base."¹⁷

Because Driedger is able to trace the socio-historical development of his two theological streams he can provide a background to the present expressions and substantiate his models. It helps explain the persistence of some patterns of behaviour and thought. One drawback to this typology is that the people often do not fit the paradigm. This drawback, common to all generalizations, has serious implications for our study. For example, Yoder is placed in the Swiss Sectarian stream, which is accurate insofar as Yoder belongs to the Mennonite Church which has a history of social

¹⁵Leo Driedger, "The Peace Panorama: Struggle for the Mennonite Soul," paper presented at the "Mennonite Peace Theology Into the 90's" colloquium held in Clearbrook, BC, June 21-23, 1991, TM [photocopy], Peace and Social Concerns, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

¹⁶Driedger, "The Peace Panorama," 2.

¹⁷Ibid, 6.

withdrawal.¹⁸ The problem arises when one then concludes, as Driedger does, that Yoder is therefore "not too involved in the larger society."¹⁹ Even though Yoder does not clearly condone involvement in politics, he is still very much involved in the larger society.²⁰ He clearly wants to see society change and he gives some specific recommendations for bringing this about, as we shall see.

Sawatsky's Four-Fold Typology. Another way to divide the various ecclesiologies is through the use of socio-political factors. Rodney J. Sawatsky suggests this in his article, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism."²¹ Sawatsky draws upon the recent scholarly consensus that Anabaptist origins were really plural and not one of a single, pure church.²² Upon this platform of plural historical beginnings Sawatsky places a four-fold socio-political typology of the contemporary

¹⁸"Mennonite Church" is one of several Anabaptist-Mennonite denominations. It used to be referred to as the "Old" Mennonite Church, and differs from other major groups such as the General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Brethren Church, Evangelical Mennonite Church, and Brethren in Christ.

¹⁹Driedger, "The Peace Panorama," 4.

²⁰Yoder sees Jesus of Nazareth as being primarily a social agitator, which is the key point made in his *Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1972).

²¹Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism," in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honour of C.J. Dyck*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa., Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992), 141-154. The title, I gather, indicates an attempt to re-cast Bender's monogenetic "Anabaptist Vision" into a more pluralistic one; it is also a play on the title of the popular *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957).

²²Sawatsky, "The One and the Many," 145.

Mennonite scene. In effect, Sawatsky is doing his best to incorporate everything—the history, the sociology, and political persuasions—into a comprehensive taxonomy of the current scene.²³

His four categories are Separationist Anabaptist, Establishment Anabaptist, Reformist Anabaptist, and Transformist Anabaptist. Sawatsky ties each of these positions to their respective roots by showing parallel sixteenth Century Anabaptist positions.²⁴ One strength of Sawatsky's proposal is that it is comprehensive. He incorporates both theological emphases (Burkholder's approach) as well as historical and sociopolitical emphases (Driedger's approach). This combination works well for describing the present situation. For example Yoder's work can be placed into the Transformist Anabaptist category. This then can account for Yoder's involvement in the larger world and yet separation from it by distinguishing between social-cultural nonconformity and political-ideological nonconformity.²⁵ Sawatsky has admitted that his proposal is introductory. The proposal needs further theological development and description. For example, it would be good to have an explanation for the

²³"Full justice to such a desired pluralist perspective cannot be one-dimensional. ... Greater comprehensiveness and nuance can be attained through a multidimensional approach to developing a taxonomy of twentieth-century Mennonite options," Sawatsky, "The One and the Many," 148.

²⁴For example, relating to each of the positions are the following: the Schleithem Confession, Menno Simons, Pilgram Marpeck, and Hans Hut, respectively, *ibid.*, 149-151.

²⁵See also Sawatsky's Ph.D. dissertation on Mennonite history and corresponding ideologies, "History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition Through History" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1977).

difference in nonconformity between the Separationist and the Transformist Anabaptists.

Dulles's Five-Fold Typology. Some of this theological rationale is provided in this typology. Without pegging specific denominations, Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* developed a system which could categorize Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies and some in between.²⁶ On a macro level (i.e., across Christian denominations) Dulles has fleshed out some theological foundations of the various ecclesiologies. Here we will consider the bearing that his work has at a micro level (i.e., within the Anabaptist tradition). Having established that a significant diversity exists among the churches within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we will explore how Dulles's models can illuminate the differences.

B. Survey of the Field of Anabaptist-Mennonite Ecclesiologies

The following survey of Mennonite ecclesiologies will show how Yoder compares with other groups within his denomination. The groups will be classified according to the differences in their contemporary expressions. This survey is introductory and comparative. The next chapter will give attention to the background and evolution of Yoder's ecclesiology.

Dulles asked three questions to each model: "What are the bonds of

²⁶Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1974, expanded edition, 1987). He indicates that his is not a rounded systematic ecclesiology and that he focuses on his experience in the Roman Catholic Church. Other relevant works by Dulles include his *The Catholicity of the Church*, and one co-authored with Patrick Granfield, *The Church: A Bibliography* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985).

union? Who are the beneficiaries? and What is the goal or purpose of the Church?"²⁷ As an alternative, one key question can be asked of each the Anabaptist-Mennonite models to quickly show the differences among them regarding the nature and purpose of the church. The question is, "*What is the relationship between the church, the world and the kingdom of God?*"²⁸

The "world" is understood by most Mennonites to be "the present order which is 'fallen' and does not profess to accept the Lordship of Christ."²⁹ Most groups understand the "church" to be "that body which in the present does acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and which, despite its fallenness, through grace imperfectly seeks to live in accordance with that Lordship."³⁰ The understanding of the "kingdom of God" is diverse.

²⁷Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 57.

²⁸This question is formulated from a letter by Ted Koontz, a professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, to his colleague, Perry Yoder, 15 April 1989, quoted in Daniel Schipani, "Type 10: An Emerging Neo-Sectarian Pacifism," in *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*, eds. John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Akron, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991) Koontz writes: "I am increasingly convinced that we must always think not only in 'dualist' terms (i.e. either church/world or old age/new age—other labels could be used) but in terms that take account of three fundamental realities—the '*world*' (the present order which is 'fallen' and does not profess to accept the Lordship of Christ), the '*church*' (that body which in the present does acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and which, despite its fallenness, through grace imperfectly seeks to live in accordance with that Lordship), and the '*Kingdom*' (the inbreaking of God's reign through the church and through various redemptive events/movements/people outside the church, and which will come full in the future as God brings it about)" (p. 79, italics mine).

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

Generally speaking, it is considered to be "the inbreaking of God's reign through the church and through various redemptive events/movements/people outside the church, and which will come full in the future as God brings it about."³¹

The Mennonite groups that will be presented are the ones that Kauffman and Harder chose in 1972 and continued to use in 1989.³² In their massive and authoritative study of the Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, they isolated the following five denominations: the Mennonite Church (MC), the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC), the Mennonite Brethren Church (MBC), the Brethren in Christ (BIC), and the Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC). These five represent the majority of Anabaptist-Mennonites, although there are numerous smaller groups that can be quite different.³³

1. The Church as Herald.

The church in Dulles's first model is seen as a herald: it has received a message, and its task is to pass it on. The mission of the church here is "to proclaim that which it has heard, believed, and been commissioned to

³¹Ibid. A more inclusive term for "kingdom" could be "reign" or "realm." In subsequent chapters I will try to follow the more inclusive usage. I have chosen to use the traditional word "kingdom" in this chapter because it is found in every one of the sources used.

³²This is seen in the standard works *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* and *The Mennonite Mosaic*, respectively.

³³For the scene in Canada, see the helpful booklet by Margaret Loewen Reimer, *One Quilt Many Pieces: A Reference Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada*, 3rd ed., (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Publishing Service, 1990).

proclaim."³⁴ In contrast to other models where the emphasis is on interpersonal relations, the emphasis here is on faith and proclamation.

This model is based upon a distinct dualism. One could call it a "soteriological" dualism because it distinguishes between the church (made up of those individuals who receive, believe, and proclaim the word) and the world (made up of those who are not "saved"). The kingdom of God is not a present reality but is looked for in the future; it is an eschatological reality. The church does not bear the kingdom of God, it proclaims that it is to come.

From the five Anabaptist-Mennonite groups studied by Kauffman and Harder, two can be identified with this model, the Mennonite Brethren Church (MBC) and the Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC). Both groups have some qualities which are distinctly Anabaptist (for example, adult baptism and radical discipleship). What sets them apart, and places them within the model of the church as herald, is their emphasis on evangelism and their eschatology.

The MBC had its beginnings in Russia. They protested against the worldliness of other Mennonites (for example, "drinking, dancing, card playing") and felt a "lack of emphasis on personal conversion that the seceders had come to experience through ... [the] evangelistic preaching of ... neighbouring ... German Lutheran Pietists and through small group meetings of 'brethren.'"³⁵ Today the MBC continues to focus on evangelism, often aligning itself more with evangelicalism than

³⁴Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 76.

³⁵Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptism Four Centuries Later*, 39.

Anabaptism.

The EMC, the smallest group of the five, has had a long history of struggling with their denominational identity. They have wanted to keep their Anabaptist roots and yet emphasize outreach and evangelism. Kauffman and Harder report that this group has "undergone the most adaptation to the American environment," borrowing from the "Sunday school movement, the revivalist movement, the holiness movement, and the fundamentalist movement."³⁶ Like the MBC's present situation, the EMC's history has been a "long, rather chronic strain between a distinctly Anabaptist-Mennonite identity and a non-Mennonite conservative evangelical identity."³⁷

Yoder's concept of the church is similar to the model of the church as herald in that he is concerned about proclaiming a message. The message, however, is different. The difference is primarily eschatological. The former group preaches the coming of the kingdom of God, the impending unambiguous reign of God which happens at the end of time. For Yoder, the metaphysical battle has already been fought and won, in principle, at the cross. Therefore, the kingdom of God is already a present reality within the church community, and exists as a distinct group on earth; it lives in the power of the victory over the principalities and powers.³⁸

³⁶Ibid., 45-46.

³⁷Ibid., 48.

³⁸This issue arises in *The Politics of Jesus* when Yoder discusses "Christ and Power," 135ff, and when he talks about atonement in *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, Ind.: Goshen Biblical Seminary, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 1981), 206ff.

2. The Church as Sacrament

In this model the church exists as a sign of God's grace. Dulles, who favoured this view when he first wrote his book, says that in this case the church "must signify in a historically tangible form the redeeming grace of Christ. It signifies that grace as relevantly given to [people] of every age, race, kind, and condition. Hence the Church must incarnate itself in every human culture."³⁹

The church has two aspects, an outer and an inner. The outer aspect of the church is seen as the visible unity of Christians. The inner aspect is the grace of Christ at work in the church, "realizing itself." Because of the central focus on grace in this view, "others besides Christians are recipients of God's grace in Christ."⁴⁰ Only in the church does this grace appear most clearly.

Accordingly, the kingdom of God is so large as to include both the church and the world. This means that God's grace is manifest in people

³⁹Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68. In this expanded edition written in 1987, thirteen years after the original, Dulles adds a chapter in order "to bring the book into alignment with my current thinking." He states his earlier preference: "The sacramental model, I there observed, seems to have exceptional capacities for incorporating what is sound in each of the other four models. Thus I hinted at the possibility of using that model as the basis for a systematic theology," *ibid.*, 206. His new preference for the notion "community of disciples" includes all of the earlier models. (He introduced this idea in an earlier article, "Community of Disciples as a Model of Church," *Philosophy & Theology* 1/2 [Fall 1986]: 99-120.) "The notion of 'community of disciples' is thus a broadly inclusive one. Without being adequate to the full reality of the Church, it has, as I shall here argue, potentialities as a basis for a comprehensive ecclesiology," *idem.*, *Models of the Church.*, 207.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 71.

both inside and outside of the church. The church, however, is the concrete expression of that grace. The church exists as the hope of the world seeking to inspire and redeem the world by its very presence.

No one Anabaptist-Mennonite denomination neatly fits this model of the church. The (Old) Mennonite Church may partially fit this view of the church as sacrament because of its self-perception as the faithful remnant serving as the leaven in society or the light on the hill. Both the leaven and the light images express elements of sacrament. The difficulty, however, in identifying the MC with the model of the church as sacrament is the MC demarcation between the church and the world—it is clear and virtually impermeable. Yet in the model of the church as sacrament, the boundary is fuzzy and more fluid.

The General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) resembles more closely the model of the church as sacrament. Kauffman and Harder describe the GCMC with the phrase, "Progress Through Mennonite Cooperation." This denomination has been progressive in the area of Mennonite unity and ecumenism and in its interaction with society. The GCMC was founded upon with the motto, "unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and love in all things."⁴¹ More will be said about the GCMC in the discussion of the next model.

Yoder's model of the church is much like the sacramental model. For example, Yoder sees the (believers') church as a sign of the new reality that has come with the Christ event. That is, Yoder, like the sacramentalists, sees the community of faith as a concrete expression of the grace of God.

⁴¹Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptist Four Centuries Later*, 36.

Where he differs with this view is that he believes that that manifestation of grace is essentially confined to the local body of believers. This is not to say that he does not believe that God acts, through grace, elsewhere in the world. Yoder would agree to that. This is still action outside of the church, and for Yoder this is action outside of the kingdom of God. For Yoder, and unlike the sacramental view, grace can be manifest outside of the church, but the kingdom cannot. The kingdom, the incarnation of which is the church, is that new reality which is necessarily distinct from the old reality. These distinctions are theological and sociological, that is, identified with a certain group of people.

3. The Church As Servant

In this model the church is not primarily a fellowship of spiritual siblings nor an expression of God's grace. Here the church exists in society primarily to improve the conditions in the world. The church is understood "as an agent for the betterment of the human community in the world at large."⁴² In each of the other models, the church in some respect operates from a privileged position. In this model, the church is on equal footing with the world. God is working in the world and it is the church's mandate to discern that work and contribute to it. It is natural that the church embraces human culture and scientific endeavors, using them to work towards peace and justice, for fighting poverty and racism.

The church and the world naturally co-exist. Where the work of Christ as "a person for others" is being done, that is where the church is,

⁴²Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 88.

and this can be inside or outside of church buildings and institutions. The kingdom of God in this model is present throughout humanity. The emphasis on the visibility of the church as a distinct community within society is downplayed.

Of the five major denominations studied by Kauffman and Harder, the General Conference Mennonite Church most resembles this model. One member of this church wrote that they are "trying to be faithful to Jesus Christ, listening to many voices for new truth." Influences of the social gospel movement can be seen in the first sentence of H.P. Krehbiel's *History of the General Conference Mennonites of North America* (1898), "Mankind is slowly but steadily advancing toward the full reception of those doctrines of our Lord Jesus Christ which apply to practical life."⁴³

In some respects Yoder's ecclesiology would fit into the model of the church as servant. Servanthood is a central theme running through Yoder's theological ethics.⁴⁴ Servanthood is the concrete expression of the radical discipleship that Yoder esteems so highly. The church in both cases seeks, in the name of Christ, to build a better society.

The crucial difference, however, between Yoder and the model of the church as servant is the perspective from which one serves. In this model the church not only serves, but also learns from the world, from new

⁴³This and the former quotation are from Heinz Janzen, "The Patchwork Quilt of the Mennonites," *Christian Living* 17,3 (March 1970): 25 are cited by Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptism Four Centuries Later*, 36-37.

⁴⁴"It is therefore not a compromise or a dilution of the fidelity of the radical commitment when the obedient Christian community becomes at the same time an instrument for serving and saving the larger culture" (John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], 11).

discoveries and technology, lest it be left behind. In Yoder's case the reverse is true. The church, because it has received special revelation, teaches the world a better way to be, lest the world be left behind.⁴⁵

4. The Church as Mystical Communion

In this model of the church, the church is like a community. The bonds holding the group together are common worship, creeds, and interpersonal fellowship.⁴⁶ The larger church is a "great community made up of many inter-locking communities. Thanks to the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit, the many families of Christians are woven into a single large family."⁴⁷

Although the kingdom of God is manifest within the boundaries of the church, these boundaries are not clear. For example, from their outward appearance, some people seem to be in the world. But because the Holy Spirit is manifest within them, they are actually a part of the mystical communion. Similarly, some people are in the church by nominal affiliation only. Yet, because the "desires of their heart" are elsewhere, they cannot truly be part of the mystical communion.

The dualism here is inward. That is, the church is not one structure which stands over against the structures of the world. The church instead

⁴⁵"The state, or more generally the organization of society, exists according to the message of the New Testament for the sake of the work of the church and not vice versa" (John H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* [Newton, Kans.: Faith and Life Press, 1964], 36).

⁴⁶The church here is understood to be a *Gemeinschaft* (community) rather than a *Gesellschaft* (society), Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 47.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

is based on the commitments of the individuals to each other.

Within the churches of Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage, the Brethren in Christ (BIC) most resemble this model. This group is actually a composite of four groups: two Anabaptist and two Pietist.⁴⁸ The BIC historian Martin Schrag writes that

the dominant church concept of the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on obedience and a sharp sense of separation from the world, was to a large degree replaced by an individualistic understanding of the faith concerned primarily with personal salvation, personal ethics, and personal evangelism.⁴⁹

That is, within the BIC there has been a movement from a more outward, institutional ecclesiology toward a more inner, personalistic, mystical ecclesiology.

On the one hand, Yoder's concept of the church is similar to the model of the church as mystical communion. Here the church is comprised of a relatively small group of individuals who share a common commitment to Christ which acts as a bond between them. Yoder also thinks that each of the church members are "brothers" and "sisters" because each of them live "in Christ." To use one of Yoder's favorite phrases, we can say that they collectively submit themselves to the "Rule of

⁴⁸Kauffman and Harder write that "The distinctiveness of the BIC results from their synthesis of the Anabaptist vision of the believers' church (via the [Pennsylvania] Mennonites and German Baptists) with the Pietistic emphasis on the personal crisis conversion and sanctification experiences (via the United Brethren and Wesleyans)," *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, 42.

⁴⁹Martin H. Schrag, "The Brethren in Christ Attitude Toward the World," (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1967), 295-296; quoted in Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, 44-45.

Christ."⁵⁰ For example, Yoder defines the church as follows:

The church, as we find the word *ekklesia* [*sic*] used in the New Testament, is first of all the people of God; not an institution but a spiritual fellowship of members who belong to it because each has followed personally a personal call.⁵¹

On the other hand, when one considers the relationship between the kingdom of God, the world, and the church, Yoder's theology does not fit this model. First of all, Yoder does not blur the distinction between the two groups of people: those in the church and those in the world. A person is either in one group or the other. This is connected to the second and greater distinction between the two approaches. In the mystical model, Christianity is largely a "matter of the heart." In Yoder's scheme, Christianity is more than mystical or inward, it is outward as well. The structure of the church and its sociological nature is central.⁵²

5. The Church as Institution

In this model the church is seen as a society, sometimes as a perfect

⁵⁰This term, together with "binding and loosing," is used to describe how the ecclesial community brings itself before the Christian Scriptures and submits to its prescriptions as gleaned by the Spirit-led community. More will be said about this in chapter three as we discuss Yoder's understanding of the "hermeneutical community."

⁵¹John H. Yoder and David A. Shank, "Biblicism and the Church," in *Concern Pamphlet #2* (Scottdale, Pa.: Concern, 1955), 26-69.

⁵²Yoder identifies the church with the visible local congregation. This, he says, is a distinction made "over against ... pietism, cell movements and other *ecclesiolae* which have the congregation but distinguish between it and the church," "What Are Our Concerns?" in *Concern Pamphlet #4* (Scottdale, Pa.: Concern, 1957), 23. Cf. p. 30 where Yoder further distinguishes between the free-church and pietist groups because the latter do not "challenge the institutional structure of the worldly church."

society. The church has a definite, visible, and hierarchical structure. It is governed by officers who wield rights and powers that are theologically and corporately sanctioned. The kingdom of God is identified with the church.

A radical dualism exists between the church and the world. The church in this model is separate and superior to the world. This is because the church is identified as the (ambiguous) incarnation of God. God is manifested in the followers of Christ and the institution that they form. At the end of history, the duality will be abolished and there will be an unambiguous reign of God.

Of the five denominations used by Kauffman and Harder the one that most nearly represents the model of the church as institution is the (Old) Mennonite Church (MC).⁵³ At one extreme are groups within the MC that are sociologically separate from the larger society. At the other extreme there are congregations and individuals within the MC that associate more closely with "the world." In spite of these sociological differences, the underlying theology is still similar. There exists in these churches the understanding that the church is to be separate from and visibly different than its surrounding secular society.

This separation is grounded in a theological dualism.⁵⁴ This dualism

⁵³There are some Anabaptist denominations that nearly exist as institutions. For example, the Hutterites and the Amish Mennonites function as separate societies. The polity is hierarchical. Bishops and elders can wield sole authority for group decisions. In this case we have a church-world dualism. For example, these denominations tend to view themselves as being part of the few who are really faithful in their following Jesus Christ. The rest of the people have compromised with the world and are not counted among the faithful.

⁵⁴Harry Loewen points out that the ecclesiology of some sixteenth century Anabaptists as expressed in their Schleithem confession is clearly

in turn is centered around the fact that individual believers will have a higher morality (through the power of the Holy Spirit, communal support and mutual admonition). Given this rationale for the visibility and moral superiority of the church, it is quite natural for those who hold this view to claim that the kingdom of God on earth is present in their church and not in the world.

Finally, we consider how Yoder's ecclesiology compares with the model of church as institution. Dulles suggests that the church in this model has the powers and functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing.⁵⁵ Yoder would agree, as we have seen, that the church teaches and sanctifies (for example, the church has the role of herald and sacrament). Governing, however, is a problem for Yoder (and for most Anabaptists-Mennonites). The church for Yoder works for justice but does not have to ensure that justice is done. That is the function of the structures and "powers that be" existing in the world outside of the church.⁵⁶ In this respect Yoder's church is not institutional. Only in a

dualistic. Moreover, the church is seen as being the same thing as the Kingdom of God. Cf., "In the kingdom of God (i.e., the Church) the Spirit of God and the power of love rule," Harry Loewen, "Church and State in the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition: Christ *versus* Caesar?" in *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions*, eds. Ross T. Bender and Alan P.F. Sell (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for The Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 1991), 147. Anabaptism of Swiss heritage, which is Yoder's background, holds this confession dearly.

⁵⁵Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 37.

⁵⁶Unlike the church, the government is forced to at times "wield the sword" in order to keep the peace, cf., *The Politics of Jesus*, 205ff. Also at issue here is the notion of "responsibility." Niebuhr and others can rightly charge that Anabaptists are "irresponsible," a theme to which Yoder gives

community that is morally independent from the larger society can the grace of Christ be operative.⁵⁷

On the other hand, because Yoder considers the kingdom of God as being already here and manifest only in the church, because Yoder sees this church as a society with its own morals distinct from the world, and because the very structures of the church and the way individuals function within the church are prescribed as different from the world, we consider Yoder's concept of the church to fit the model of the church as institution. This institution has a mandate to "go forth and make disciples," to influence its surroundings by role-modeling and direct action, and to break down earthly barriers of racism, sexism, and classism. In short, Yoder's Anabaptist-Mennonite concept of the church is not purely inward-looking—he has a vision for transforming all of human society and for restoring the unity of all Christians.

This survey of Mennonite ecclesiologies has served to illustrate the diversity of theological views of the church among different Anabaptist-Mennonite groups. It has also shown how Yoder's ecclesiology is similar to and yet different from models of the church as mystical communion, herald, sacrament, servant and institution. In the following chapter we will take a more detailed look at the background and roots of Yoder's concept of the church.

considerable attention and one to which we must return in a subsequent chapter.

⁵⁷See, for example, John H. Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Theology Today* 48 (April 1991): 42.

Chapter 2

The Anabaptist Vision: The Next Generation

This chapter will look at the background and development of Yoder's concept of the church. It will show that from the outset, Yoder has sought to work out an ecumenical expression for his work in the church. Yoder caught the "Anabaptist vision" of his academic parents. He became part of the new scholarly interest in restoring the vision of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Yoder first shared this vision with others in his denomination. Then he extended it towards the Believers' church and beyond.¹

Also in this chapter we will see how Yoder has wrestled with the influence of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. The final section of this chapter will take a sociological pause to ask the church-sect question: is

¹The term "Believers' church" is here used in the way Donald F. Durnbaugh presents it in *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: MacMillan, 1968; reprint, Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1985). His definition of the term is seven-fold. Members a) exercise voluntary membership, b) practice separation from the world, c) "perform Christian works," d) practice mutual admonition, e) provide mutual aid, f) have a brief and neat order for baptism," and g) centre themselves around the Bible, (pp. 32-33).

The churches within this grouping include Mennonites, Hutterites, Baptists, Quakers, Church of the Brethren, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, Plymouth Brethren and the Confessing Church.

Yoder's ecclesiology sectarian or churchly? This inquiry is necessary because of the common perception that Mennonites are a sect, a perception which Yoder has tirelessly sought to shatter. We will see that Yoder's proposal can be seen as sectarian, but at the same time, it is no more sectarian than any other view of the church.

A. Background to Yoder and His Ecumenical Concerns

Charting the changes throughout an individual's history is never easy. In some cases, authors will speak autobiographically and tell of situations that have influenced their thinking. Other times, people share specific examples from their own lives and then show how what they write is personally meaningful. None of this is true in the case of Yoder.

Gayle Gerber Koontz, now dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, discovered Yoder's private side and has written about it in her dissertation on him and H. Richard Niebuhr:

Both Niebuhr and Yoder were/are private persons with regard to sharing their personal experience in their theological teaching and writing.... Yoder, I know, seldom speaks of his personal experience of faith because, he says, it is not the shape of his personal experience or response that is important but rather God's action in Christ. His de-emphasis on the subjective is also apparent in such statements as "Now it's fine if the truth is real to you; but if it's not, it's you who are left out and not the truth."²

In spite of his reticence in this area, we can observe three phases in his

²Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder," (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1985), 60, n.29. The Yoder quotation is taken from "Was Jesus a Political Person?", chapel address at Goshen College, Ind., 22 October 1973.

development. These phases can be described as the early Goshen phase, the Concern phase, and the Believers' Church ecumenical phase. We turn now to a discussion of Yoder's past, with the intention of exploring how over the years his ecumenical concern was developing.

1. The Early Goshen Phase

John Howard Yoder, born in 1927, is a native of Ohio, attended the College of Wooster, graduated from Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, with a major in Bible, and attended the University of Akron.³ At the age of 22, Yoder went to Europe representing the Mennonite Central Committee. He later earned the Th.D. degree from the University of Basel in Switzerland.⁴ By the time he left for Europe, Yoder had already been significantly shaped: he had gained a respect for scholarship, he had learned the importance of justifying one's position by establishing historical roots, and he was convinced that Anabaptism as a movement could rightly stand alongside the other major denominations. We can trace the roots of his thought back to the influences he received from Harold S. Bender and the "Goshen School." "Goshen school" refers to Mennonite scholars at Goshen College (a private Mennonite college in Goshen, Indiana) in the 1940s and 1950s. They launched a campaign of serious academic study in the area of

³Taken from the introduction to Yoder's "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," in *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, ed. James Leo Garrett, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969), 250. In a brief interview with the thesis author, Yoder said his studies at the University of Akron were somewhat irrelevant to his study program. He took courses in psychology and mathematics in order "to keep busy while I was working."

⁴See p. 30, fn. 14 below.

sixteenth-century Anabaptism. They established the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, produced a four-volume *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, and developed an historical library. Chief among these scholars was Harold S. Bender. Yoder himself indicates that Bender, together with Franklin H. Littell, sparked his interest in Reformation studies.⁵

The dawning of the twentieth century spawned an unparalleled renaissance in Anabaptism. The high point in this scholarly surge was Bender's address to the American Society of Church History, "The Anabaptist Vision."⁶ According to one historian, "the recovery occurred in three phases: historical, sociological, and theological."⁷ Bender started the historical phase which "began in the mid-twenties when [he] went to Goshen College, established the Mennonite Historical Library, and began publication of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*."⁸ The sociological phase was begun by J. Winfield Fretz in the late 1930s.

The theological phase was started by Robert Friedmann on May 14, 1949, at Goshen Biblical Seminary, at the occasion of a seminar on Anabaptist Theology. Friedmann felt that "this meeting was the first attempt at more systematic theologizing about the implications of the sixteenth-century for the contemporary church." He said that it was

⁵See Yoder's introduction to *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz: Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538* (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1962).

⁶Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (1944): 3-24.

⁷Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement: Its Origins and Early History," *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Spring 1990): 114ff.

⁸*Ibid.*, 114-115.

a remarkable situation: more than four hundred years after the beginning of the Anabaptist movement we have come together to find out what kind of theology Anabaptists and Mennonites actually have.⁹

These academics, all of whom were devoted to the church, sought to apply the discoveries from the various disciplines to the present situation. They sought a renewal of the Anabaptist church.

As early as 1960, Yoder reflected on the significance of the vision which Bender and others had articulated. What became important for Yoder about this rediscovery of Anabaptism was the interaction between the radical reformers and the magisterial reformers. For example, Yoder discovered that the Anabaptists who associated with Zwingli had much in common with Zwingli. He noted that in the early years, they were united in their theology. Only after much deliberation did they split with Zwingli.¹⁰

It was natural for Yoder to see in these Anabaptist beginnings the foundation for ecumenical discussions. That is, he could say that the two positions are not so far apart; they meant to do the same thing, i.e., reform the church, according to a fresh reading of scripture. Yoder argued that because Zwingli chose to make the changes with the help of the magistrates, Zwingli made too great a compromise. The Anabaptists, said

⁹Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement," 115. The Friedmann citation is from his "Anabaptism and Protestantism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (January 1950): 12. Cf. Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973).

¹⁰See Yoder, "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65,1 (January 1991): 16; and compare his "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 32 (April 1958): 128-140.

Yoder, did not.¹¹ Bender and his colleagues helped to develop these ideas. For Yoder, it was in his further studies in Europe that these ideas really grew and bore fruit—and eventually caused some differences between him and Bender.

2. The Concern Phase

In 1949, at the age of 22, Yoder left America for the continent. He directed relief activities in France under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee (M.C.C.).¹² Until 1957 he participated in "ecumenical

¹¹To be sure, Conrad Grebel and his fellow would-be Anabaptists worked together with Zwingli as he sought the support of the magistrates in their ecclesial reforms. But their relationship to the magistrates was different and ultimately incompatible. As Yoder explains in his article, "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation" (*Mennonite Quarterly Review* 43,1 [January 1969]: 95-122), Zwingli and his younger colleagues shared two theological strands: one was theocratic, i.e., they shared a "vision of the restored Christian republic" (ibid., 110), and the other was a belief that the church be a "visible congregation of people who know what they believe literally gathered together, hearing God's Word and making decisions which they carry out regardless of what the powers of this world permit" (ibid.). They shared a common goal—that all people come under the reign of Christ. But where they differed was in the means of attaining that goal. Zwingli believed that the church "could use the state in order ultimately to achieve her own purposes" (ibid., 119). The Anabaptists "did not believe that government could thus be ennobled in the service of the church" (ibid.). Furthermore, Zwingli was prepared to wait for further reforms to take place for the sake of preventing an uproar. The Anabaptists were not as patient. Yoder sums up the difference between the two: "This is the root of Zwingli's inability to understand the Anabaptists. He saw the problem of reformation always from the perspective of the total society which was to be rebuilt in an orderly fashion from the top" (ibid., 122).

¹²A.G. van Gilse notes in November, 1953, that "John H. Yoder is leader-in-charge of the *Foyer Mennonite* at Valdoie near Belfort in France and the Mennonite Central Committee representative on the Continuation Committee of the Historic Peace Churches in Europe," taken from the preface to Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*,

conversations on questions of war and the peace witness of the church."¹³ He received the Th.D. degree in 1962 from the University of Basel. His dissertation focused on the early conversations between Anabaptists and Reformers.¹⁴

In this European environment, Yoder gained confidence as a young man and a scholar. He began to question the reforms set in motion by the Goshen School and its new vision. This questioning culminated in a meeting of what one historian calls the "Amsterdam Club" which eventually led to what is now called the "Concern Movement."¹⁵ Meeting in Amsterdam in April of 1952 were seven young Mennonite intellectuals who were "either attending graduate schools or working in the service of Mennonite Central Committee and church mission agencies."¹⁶ All seven—Irvn B. Horst, John W. Miller, Paul Peachey, Calvin Redekop, David A. Shank, Orley Swartzentruber, and Yoder—were graduates of

Heerewegen Pamphlet Number One (Zeist, The Netherlands: 1954), reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101-117.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴It was entitled, "Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538," and was published a few years later as *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz: I. Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538* (Karlsruhe: H. Schneider, 1962). He published a companion volume to this, *Täuferium und Reformation im Gespräch: Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung der frühen Gespräche zwischen Schweizerischen Täufern und Reformatoren* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), one chapter of which appeared as "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 43,1 (January 1969): 95-122.

¹⁵Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement," 118.

¹⁶Ibid., 109.

either Goshen College or Eastern Mennonite College.¹⁷ This first meeting was held for two weeks. They heard two lectures daily, delivered by themselves or by distinguished Dutch scholars. In addition, they took a weekend trip to Friesland which "would permit visiting the Mennonite holy shrines."¹⁸

Scholarship was central for the Concern group. Those who studied social theory discussed Karl Marx, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Emile Durkheim; those specializing in twentieth-century literature read T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis; those in Anabaptism read Harold Bender, Guy F. Hershberger, and Ernst Troeltsch; those in theology studied the neo-orthodoxy of Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁹ As a result of Yoder's central position in the group, he became well-acquainted with each of these thinkers.

For a decade after the Amsterdam meeting the group continued to meet and correspond informally. Former editor of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Rodney J. Sawatsky, notes that those in the Concern movement wanted to see their academic discoveries put into practice:

Central to their reform was, I believe, the theology of the church. All profoundly influenced by Harold S. Bender and his colleagues, they were inspired by the recovery of the Anabaptist vision. *Vision was not enough, however.* The recovery required completion by applying Anabaptism to church polity

¹⁷Both colleges were operated by the Mennonite Church, one of several Mennonite denominations, and the group to which Yoder belonged.

¹⁸Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement," 109.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 110.

and institutional structures.²⁰

The movement found its voice in a newly established journal entitled *Concern: A Pamphlet Series*. It was published as eighteen slender volumes between the years 1954 and 1971. Yoder served as associate editor and published more than seven major articles, some of which have been reprinted or become chapters in books. The following titles indicate his concerns: "The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic of the Place of the Disciple in Society,"²¹ "Binding and Loosing"²² (based on Matthew 18:15-20, a major theme for Yoder), and "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision."²³

In this Concern phase of Yoder's development, he challenged the generation of Mennonite leaders that preceded him. Yoder wrote to Bender:

What has happened to me is that in the process of growing up I have put together an interest in anabaptism [*sic*], which you gave me, an MCC [Mennonite Central Committee] experience to which you were instrumental in assigning me, and theological study to which you directed me, to come out with what is a more logical fruition of your own convictions than

²⁰Rodney J. Sawatsky, "Editorial: A Concern Retrospective," *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Spring 1990): iii. Paul Toews charts the concerns and subsequent activities of the seven members of this group in his article, "The Concern Movement," pp. 109-126. (This article will become part of the fourth volume of *The Mennonite Experience in America*.)

²¹*Concern Pamphlet # 1* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern, 1954): 45-68.

²²*Concern Pamphlet #14* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern, 1967), 2-32.

²³*Concern #18: Radical Reformation Reader* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern, 1971): 5-23.

you yourself realize.²⁴

In spite of his hailing the return of the Anabaptist vision, Yoder accused Bender's generation of being too liberal. In a letter to Bender's colleague, John C. Wenger, Yoder insists that the younger generation was defending historic Anabaptism and the older generation was really a group of "Protestant compromisers." "Much of what had transpired between 1925 and 1950 under the name of 'orthodox Mennonitism' was in reality," says Yoder, "protestant orthodoxy with nonresistance and nonconformity appended."²⁵ Toews suggests that part of the frustration of the young "Concerned" intellectuals was the natural frustration that can form between generations. He says of this letter to Bender that it "had all of the earmarks of the sons doing battle with the fathers."²⁶

The kind of reforms that Yoder was (and still is) looking for were ecclesiological. First of all, Yoder was displeased that the Bender group still clung to a hierarchical church polity. "Yoder's post-Amsterdam reflections lamented that the church was run from the top down by a network of committees and budget controllers."²⁷ A second critique was levelled against the elaborate Mennonite institution-building: if the sixteenth-

²⁴John Howard Yoder to Harold S. Bender, July 2, 1954, John Howard Yoder Papers, Box 11, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, as found in Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement," 112.

²⁵Ibid., 112. Cf., John Howard Yoder to John C. Wenger, July 10, 1954, John Howard Yoder Papers, Box 11, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 118. Yoder and three others of the "Amsterdam club" observed that the MCCs "decision making was centralized and pyramided." Ibid.

century Anabaptists differed theologically with what they saw as a *corpus christianum*, these twentieth-century Anabaptists (i.e., Bender, et al.) made the mistake of developing their own "*corpus mennonitarium*." First there was the "Constantianization of Christianity," which was followed by an analogous "Mennonitization of Anabaptism."²⁸ That is, the Mennonites, who are in principle against church institutionalism, have in the process of articulating such a stance, developed their own institutions.

On the one hand, I agree with the criticisms Yoder lodged against Bender, Wenger, and the Mennonite institutions they built. The Acts account of the church community shows much less structure and more face to face encounters and accountability. This paradigm of the church as a local community is reinforced by the kind of house churches the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were forced to create. Furthermore, the less-institutional model, which Yoder recommends, *can* work in the contemporary situation. Consider, for example, the decades of success that Reba Place Fellowship (Evanston, Illinois) has enjoyed. It was started with the help of John W. Miller (one of Yoder's colleagues and part of the "Amsterdam club"), who sought to implement the rediscoveries of the "Anabaptist vision."

On the other hand, however, religious groups cannot survive without structure and some form of institutions. Even Reba Place Fellowship has a constitution upon which it and its daughter communities are based. Reba Place has published books describing what they believe and how

²⁸Toews introduces both of these phrases, *ibid.*, 120.

membership is to function.²⁹ The future of a religious body depends upon its institutions to carry them along. A common understanding of the sacraments, common styles of worship, newsletters or periodicals (which reinforce the group's identity by presenting the group's peculiar interpretation of events) are all needed to keep a vision alive. There is a good side to all the machinery within a church—it provides cohesion, establishes identity, and maintains continuity. Yoder's accusation that the church was run in a top-down manner by committees and budget controllers is a necessary dimension to corporate life. Hierarchy is an inherent quality of any group. The challenge is not to do away with the hierarchy, as Yoder intimates. The challenge is to see the institutions and their leaders as a necessary part of the church and to make sure that the hierarchy serves the group, not vice versa.

The thought of Bender and friends have had a profound effect on Yoder's thinking. But Yoder had other influences. During this European Concern phase of his development, Yoder was challenged by the burgeoning thought of the prominent theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). He was also confronted with the rigorous anti-pacifist stance of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), who dominated the theological scene in America. It is worthwhile to consider the impact the thought of these two men have had on Yoder.

The Impact of Karl Barth

²⁹See John W. Miller, *The Christian Way: A Guide to the Christian Life based on the Sermon on the Mount* (Scottsdale, Pa., Kitchener, Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1969) which, according to the back cover, "was developed initially as a study resource for those seeking membership in this [Reba Place] Christian fellowship."

The influence Barth has had on Yoder's thought is at least three-fold.³⁰ First of all, we see in Yoder a commitment to the centrality of the Word of God. Again and again Yoder emphasizes his need to let the text (which for him is usually, but not always, the synoptic gospels) speak to the situation (through the Spirit-led discerning community).³¹ Barth and Yoder both claim to subordinate human reason to what they see as the message of the text.

A second influence that Barth had on Yoder is an emphasis on the church as a visible body. Yoder considers Barth as being original among the so-called "neo-orthodox" theologians (e.g., Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and H. Richard Niebuhr) in his assertion that "the church is herself a social body," and that one cannot in speaking to the civil community "presuppose faith in Christ."³² Yoder sees in Barth's writing an axiom that is

unprecedented in the thought of his teachers and contemporaries, whether orthodox or liberal, that there are two quite distinct principles of community [i.e., the believing community and the civil community], so *that* there must be

³⁰See Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*; "The Basis of Barth's Social Ethics," (unpublished manuscript, 1978, General Papers, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana); and "Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 166-171.

³¹More will be said about this in chapter 4, "The Hermeneutical Task of the Gathered Community: Shaping the Canon with Communal Memory."

³²Yoder, *The Pacifism of Karl Barth* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1968), 9, as cited in Philip LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology in John Howard Yoder's Critique of Constantinianism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 152-153.

different structures of community, so *that* there must be different moral and legal languages.... The ordered structure of human togetherness is not univocal. There is the order of believing community, and order of servanthood and doxology. It is not derived from the shape of the civil order... the derivation goes the other way.³³

Yoder's concept of the church as an identifiable social group is based on the New Testament, supported by references to Anabaptist history, but also reinforced by the theology of Karl Barth.³⁴

A third influence from Barth has to do with the distinction between Christianity and "religion."

Human efforts to reach the divine, including human efforts to operate apophatic or ascetic disciplines so as to get out of the way and facilitate the divine's reaching us, are all the kind of self-salvation effort which Christian faith condemns as pride.... This pattern of criticism by Kraemer and Karl Barth was a part of the breakthrough in the 1930s of recognition that old patterns of interpretation of Christianity as a "typical" human phenomenon were not working.³⁵

In the writings of psychologists Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Gustav Jung or Erik H. Erikson, "'religion' is explained 'from below' as a human performance, and not the most mature kind at that."³⁶ Yoder says that "the

³³Yoder, "Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing," 170.

³⁴Yoder cites Barth in defense of adult baptism and rejection of infant baptism. See his "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, Ont.: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1979), p.3.

³⁵Yoder, "Civil Religion in America," *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 183-184.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 184.

theological name for such misdirected religion is *idolatry*, 'worshipping the creature instead of the Creator.'³⁷ Genuine Christianity worships the Creator, and celebrates the coming of God in Christ. Through this incarnation God has objectively broken into human history and has thereby changed the very nature of reality. The incarnation ushers in a new age. This act is entirely God's initiative and God's accomplishment. All humans can do is respond accordingly. That is, they can demonstrate a willingness to become part of this new age, or second aeon.³⁸ Christianity is explained "from above." "Religion" is explained "from below." Christians worship the Creator instead of the creature. Through such a distinction between Christianity and "religion," Yoder is able to minimize the subjective element of faith. To say, as Yoder does, that Christianity is based on God's action in Christ, the one who inaugurates the new age, shifts the focus of faith away from experience of the divine towards belief or conviction. What we do not see in Yoder's work is an articulation of what Paul Tillich and Rudolf Otto would call the universal experience of the something beyond us, something within us. The object, which in this case is the God of the Bible made known through Jesus the Christ, must be perceived in some manner within the subject. Tillich would say that faith has closer connections to everyday experience. It is our "ultimate concern." It stems from the profound human experience of finitude (an "ontological

³⁷Ibid., 185.

³⁸See Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 9, and "Peace Without Eschatology?" (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern Reprint, 1959, 6ff.; reprinted with endnotes in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 58ff.

shock"), and awareness of the infinite God. Also lacking in Yoder's work is an adequate explanation of the human condition. Other theologies have it. Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr describe a person's experience of finitude and their perception of "self-transcendence," which leads to anxiety and sin. Otto talks about the experience of the "numinous," and the corresponding feeling of dependence.³⁹ Similarly, James Gustafson treats the subjective human experience as foundational. He says that "religion is grounded in experiences of self," and proceeds to list six of these experiences. He calls them "aspects of piety, or aspects of religious affection": a sense of dependence (like Otto), a sense of gratitude, a sense of obligation, a sense of remorse and repentance, a sense of possibilities, and a sense of direction.⁴⁰ Christianity has at its foundation both divine and human dimensions—it is based on God's actions in history as well as human perception and response to those acts.⁴¹ This understanding of Christianity's starting point allows for, or at least has the seeds of tolerance,

³⁹"But this 'feeling of reality', the feeling of a 'numinous' *object* objectively given, must be posited as a primary immediate datum of consciousness, and the 'feeling of dependence' is then a consequence, following very closely upon it, viz. a depreciation of the *subject* in his own eyes. The latter presupposes the former" (Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, transl. John W. Harvey [London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958], 11).

⁴⁰James M. Gustafson, *Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective: Theology and Ethics*, vol. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 130-134.

⁴¹"The New Testament witness is unanimous in its witness to Jesus as the Christ. This witness is the foundation of the Christian church" (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume II: Existence and the Christ* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 118).

for different expressions of the faith.⁴² It also affords the theologian greater humility, giving him or her parameters with which to see God at work in other human groups. Yoder is aware of the relatively little attention he gives to the human experience of the divine. He has a good reason for this—the Christian religion is not based upon human experience as much as it is a response to God's revelation. Yoder writes in response to Gustafson, "Of course all reflection must proceed from experience, but all experiences are not equal."⁴³ It is for this reason humans need a measuring stick to set against their experiences:

Of course in the order of knowing, man is the measurer, but the yardsticks we use are not equally valid. The Christian doctrines of election and incarnation confess that God has sovereignly chosen *certain* public events to clarify what He enables and requires...

From the confessional perspective, it is a *less* anthropocentric procedure when one thus lets God set the terms of our knowledge of Him than when man the measurer claims for himself the authority to set those terms. Classically speaking, a vision that lets God set the terms of our knowledge of God is more theocentric than one that entrusts this knowing to the contemporary marketplace.⁴⁴

⁴²Cf. the merits of George Lindbeck's "experiential-expressive" category of religious doctrine, in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 30-45.

⁴³Yoder, "Theological Revision and the Burden of Particular Identity," in James M. Gustafson's *Theocentric Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments*, eds. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 71.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 71-72.

The Impact of Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr is perhaps the most significant non-Mennonite figure who has shaped the thinking and writing of Yoder. Yet in Yoder's thought Niebuhr's influence can be seen mostly as a reaction. That is, Yoder has felt the need to defend his position against Niebuhr's.

Early in his academic career, Yoder took up the task of challenging Niebuhr's critique of pacifism. He outlined his objections to Niebuhr's critique in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*.⁴⁵ These objections, which have not changed substantially over the years, can be outlined in the following four-fold manner:

First, Yoder says that Niebuhr has a "sentimental depreciation of the horror and sinfulness of war."⁴⁶ Is war truly a "lesser evil" than, as Niebuhr would say, tyranny? Yoder says this is not so because of two fallacies. The first is a factual fallacy. We should not assume that war is necessarily a better means of conflict than non-violence, nor can we say

⁴⁵Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Heerewegen Pamphlet Number One (The Netherlands: Zeist, 1954), reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101-117. Subsequent citations refer to the 1954 booklet. See also *The Christian Witness to the State*, 66-68, in which Yoder criticizes Niebuhr's superimposition of the norms of love and justice over New Testament agape.

Elsewhere Yoder refutes H. Richard Niebuhr's political-sectarian dichotomy. See *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972) and, "'Christ and Culture': A Critique of H. Richard Niebuhr" TM [photocopy], 1976, General Papers, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana. See also Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder."

⁴⁶Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 16.

that war is "less harmful to civilization and moral values than tyranny."⁴⁷ The second is a moral fallacy. It is a "failure to distinguish between agents. Slavery may be 'worse than war' in the sense that it is more unpleasant for me; but in war that sin is mine, in slavery it is not."⁴⁸

The problem with this statement is its subjectivism. What if the slavery is not mine? What if others are suffering under the hands of an oppressive regime (for example, the Jews under Hitler, and Somalia and the minorities in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s)?⁴⁹ Yoder admits that the state must exercise a police function. But he does not extrapolate that national function into an international setting. Should an international agency, like the United Nations, intervene into the human rights abuses one country does to another? If so, on what grounds, and to what extent, should it intervene, and in this case, is war justified? Yoder does not address these difficult questions.

Yoder's second objection to Niebuhr has to do with what he calls "the presuppositions of Niebuhr's ethical reasoning."⁵⁰ Yoder, for example, questions Niebuhr's use of three terms: "impossibility" (i.e., Christ's ethic of love is an impossible and ideal ethic); "necessity" (e.g., it is sometimes necessary to abandon the ethical ideal of love in order to defend the social order); and "responsibility" (i.e., we are responsible for maintaining the

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Gordon Harland asked this question in the margin of an essay I submitted to him, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism: A Critique," for a course in contemporary theology at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, April, 1988, p. 19.

⁵⁰Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 16.

social order, and because society is sinful, we will violate the law of love in doing so). "These concepts... are used by Niebuhr in such a way as to introduce new norms into ethics, which because of the existence of sin, are allowed to cancel out love."⁵¹ Even though Yoder correctly analyzes Niebuhr's use of these three terms, showing how they undermine allegiance to Jesus' command to love the neighbour, he fails to offer a viable alternative. That is, Yoder fails to offer a way to deal with the deep-rooted conflict within society. Yoder abandons pragmatic concerns for the sake of faithful (but idealistic) consistency. Yoder can show that the love ethic is to be our norm. But is this ethic effective in bringing about social justice? Yoder cannot promise that Christian acts of love will be effective in reducing conflict in the world. For confidence he looks to the resurrection of Jesus. He says, "The cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy."⁵²

Yoder's third objection relates to Niebuhr's tolerance of an ethical pluralism.

Niebuhr will recognize as valid any pacifism which agrees to recognize Niebuhr's non-pacifism as equally valid. Thus he supposes that there can be two contradictory positions, both right as long as both are held tolerantly.⁵³

⁵¹Ibid., 18.

⁵²Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 250. "That Christian pacifism which has a theological basis in the character of God and the work of Jesus Christ is one in which the calculating link between our obedience and ultimate efficacy has been broken, since the triumph of God comes through resurrection and not through effective sovereignty or assured survival" (ibid., 246).

⁵³Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 19.

Niebuhr recognized two kinds of pacifism, one he considered heretical, and one not. The non-heretical kind is demonstrated by Protestant sectarian perfectionism and also by medieval ascetic perfectionism:⁵⁴ the kind in which individuals practice an "apolitical" peacefulness. Niebuhr did, however, denounce the modern Christian forms of pacifism as heretical. The Fellowship of Reconciliation and other liberal Christians inherited what he called a Renaissance faith in the goodness of human being. They too easily dismissed the doctrine of original sin.⁵⁵ With efforts such as *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder has tried to show that the first kind of pacifism can in fact be political, because Jesus was political. Out of the faithful witness of an alternate community, Yoder argues that a pacifist position can still justifiably engage itself in society with intentions to change society. Even though Yoder gives plenty of convincing biblical rationale for his position, he fails to give concrete examples of how a political pacifism would solve international conflicts.

Yoder's fourth objection to Niebuhr's critique of pacifism relates to Niebuhr's understanding of the human condition. Yoder says it is not biblical, and that Niebuhr fails to grasp and incorporate the concept of redemption into his ethic.

Those Christian doctrines which relate to the redemption are consistently slighted by Niebuhr, transferred to another realm of being, or read as mythological expressions of man's capacities

⁵⁴See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," in his *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940; reprint, United States of America: Anchor Books, 1969), 1-32 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

for transcendence.⁵⁶

Niebuhr speaks of the cross, but not of the resurrection, says Yoder. In addition, "Niebuhr has no place for the doctrine of regeneration since the saint is for him still a sinner, even though he may be a less offensive one.... The Holy Spirit is likewise neglected in Niebuhr's ethics."⁵⁷ He says Niebuhr does not account for the power given by the Holy Spirit to enable individual Christians to do good. In this analysis Yoder is too weak on his doctrine of original sin, and too optimistic about the possibilities for Christians and Christian groups. Too often Christians act just like other people, including those who have religion and those who do not—sometimes they are selfless, and sometimes they are selfish. This criticism will be discussed again in another section below.⁵⁸

In the Concern phase, Yoder directed his academic efforts toward instructing and strengthening the people within his own Mennonite denomination. In Europe he gathered with young allies that supported this cause. Then his aim broadened. As he interacted with sixteenth-century literature, as he sought to be faithful to the biblical record, and because he and his colleagues turned to concepts like *corpus christianum* and the "Constantianization of Christianity," Yoder began to lift his vision beyond the borders of his Mennonite constituency and consider the larger picture.

3. Believers' Church Ecumenical Phase

⁵⁶Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 20.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁸See ch. 6, p. 154 below.

In his association with a group known as the "Believers' church," Yoder began to focus his ecumenical concerns.⁵⁹ Believers' churches began to hold conferences in which they set about the task of defining themselves in terms which were independent from and presentable to the mainline traditions. Almost since its inception, Yoder has been part of this group's leadership and has served unofficially as their historian. The editor of the first report writes: "The Conference on the Concept of the Believers' Church, if not born as his idea, matured from infancy in the mind and heart of Dr. John Howard Yoder."⁶⁰

The origin of these meetings dates back to before 1961 when Johannes A. Oosterbaan was called to represent the *Doopsgezinde* of the Netherlands at the World Council of Churches. He was bothered that whereas the mainline Christian churches had clear statements and documents with which to enter the ecumenical arena,

The churches of the Radical Reformation traditions have

⁵⁹For a definition of Believers' church, see n. 1 above.

⁶⁰James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969), 250. For Yoder's contributions see "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," in the same volume, 250-283; "The Believer's Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believer's Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, Ont.: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee, 1979), 3-15; "Introduction," in *Baptism and Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. by Merle D. Strege (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Sagamore Books, 1986), 3-7; and, "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65,1 (January 1991): 5-19. A standard work on this topic is Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*.

A list of past Conferences on the Concept of the Believers' Church is given as Appendix B in the seventh conference report volume, *Baptism and Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. by Merle D. Strege (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Sagamore Books, 1986).

neither a single language nor a concerted strategy. In fact, the heirs of the various "free" renewal movements hardly even know one another.⁶¹

The vision then was to unite the various Free Churches.⁶² The hope was that documents created by such a group could be presented to ecumenical bodies and thereby offer another view of where the church is and should be.

Yoder's part in this task led him to formulate an understanding of the

⁶¹Yoder, "Introduction," *Baptism and Church*, 3.

⁶²Yoder provides a working definition of what he considers the various "Free Churches." It is insufficient to say that a "free church" is "any ecclesiastical body which does not enjoy the institutional support of, or control by, the organs of civil government" (Yoder, "Radical Reformation Ethics in Ecumenical Perspective," *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], 105). By this definition "the Presbyterians are a free church in England and the Anglicans in Scotland," says Yoder (*ibid.*). He pushes the definition one degree further and says that "a free church is one in which membership is voluntary" (*ibid.*). But he prefers to use George H. Williams's term "radical reformation" with the following understanding: "I shall rather resort, despite some of its shortcomings, to the label 'radical reformation' as representative of a genuinely distinctive vision of what the church is about in the world. This view is most thoroughly worked out in the thought and experience of the Swiss Brethren among the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century and among the Quakers and Baptists arising out of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Before that, only slightly less clear formulations can be encountered in the Waldenses and Czech Brethren. Later there are radical pietists, several kinds of groups called 'Brethren,' and the Disciples" (*ibid.*, 106).

ecumenical movement.⁶³ More will be said in the final chapter about the distinct shape of Yoder's contribution to the ecumenical movement. Suffice it to say at this point, that ever since he has been involved with the Conferences on the Concept of the Believers' Church, Yoder has broadened his self-understanding. He has moved from representing one Swiss-Mennonite tradition to seeing himself as representing the several historic peace churches. His intention is to reach a wider audience. He has moved from addressing the Mennonite church to speaking to the whole Christian church.⁶⁴

⁶³The most prominent issue which he has addressed is war and peace. See, for example, Yoder, Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, and Eugene F. Roop, *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal has Begun*, A Contribution to Ecumenical Dialogue sponsored by Church of the Brethren, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Mennonite Central Committee, and Friends General Conference (Scottsdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1991).

⁶⁴See Yoder, "40 Years of Ecumenical Theological Dialogue Efforts on Justice and Peace Issues by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the 'Historic Peace Churches,'" Appendix C, in *A Declaration on Peace*, 93-105. The "historic peace churches" are, "the Church of the Brethren, the various kinds of Mennonites, and Quakers [and have been grouped as such] ever since 1935," Yoder, p.108.

Included in this Believers' Church phase is a series of gatherings known as the "Puidoux Conferences." These conferences began in a way that is similar to those mentioned above, except in this case the driving force was a need for the WCC to hear the peace position. Four major conferences took place, all in Europe, in 1955, 1957, 1960, and 1962.

Robert Bilheimer, of the World Council of Churches, explained in 1955 that "realistically, by the nature of the WCC politics, there could be no *direct* pacifist contribution. If, however, the peace people [Fellowship of Reconciliation and the historic peace churches] did a significant study of their own, and came up with notable results, the other churches and the WCC would have to take notice," quoted in Yoder, "40 Years of Ecumenical Theological Dialogue," 97-98.

B. A Sociological Pause: The Church-Sect Question

The next chapter will present a detailed outline of Yoder's Anabaptist ecclesiology. Before we analyze it however, it is worthwhile to take a sociological pause, and consider the church-sect issue.⁶⁵ Anabaptist or Mennonite theology has occasionally been dismissed simply because it is "sectarian."⁶⁶ What does this mean, and is such a dismissal fair? The

⁶⁵Ernst Troeltsch, in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (London: George Allen & Unwin, and New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931) describes the difference between a church and sect: "The Church is that type of organization which is overwhelmingly conservative, which to a certain extent accepts the secular order, and dominates the masses; in principle, therefore, it is universal, i.e. it desires to cover the whole life of humanity. The sects, on the other hand, are comparatively small groups; they aspire after personal inward perfection and they aim at a direct personal fellowship between the members of each group. From the very beginning, therefore they are forced to organize themselves in small groups, and to renounce the idea of dominating the world. Their attitude towards the world, the State, and Society may be indifferent, tolerant, or hostile, since they have no desire to control and incorporate these forms of social life; on the contrary, they tend to avoid them; their aim is usually either to tolerate their presence alongside of their own body, or even to replace these social institutions by their own society" (vol. 1, p. 331).

Troeltsch used the terms to describe European ecclesiastical structures and society. In fact, the above definition is taken from his chapter on Mediaeval Catholicism. The terms as he used them do not apply in the context of the twentieth century and the North American separation of church and state. For example, Troeltsch said, "The fully developed Church, however, utilizes the State and the ruling classes, and weaves these elements into her own life; she then becomes an integral part of the existing social order; from this standpoint, then, the Church both stabilizes and determines the social order; in so doing, however, she becomes dependent upon the upper classes, and upon their development. The sects, on the other hand, are connected with the lower classes, or at least with those elements in Society which are opposed to the State and to Society; they work upwards from below, and not downwards from above" (ibid.).

⁶⁶"Out of the many sects that arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, protesting against the worldly church, both Catholic and Protestant, and seeking to live under the Lordship of Christ alone, only a

(Note continued on next page.)

remainder of this chapter will explain how Yoder's ecclesiology is, on the one hand, sectarian, and, on the other hand, no more sectarian than any other church group.

In his first article ever published, Yoder squarely confronts the question of "sectarianism."⁶⁷ In this article, Yoder positively identifies with the "sectarian" stance he seeks to describe. He differentiates this position from what he calls the "responsible" position. He defines "sect" in terms of Christian discipleship as follows:

The term "sect" . . . as here used should be clearly distinguished from its ecclesiological usage, where it signifies the separation of a church from other churches in order to be pure, as well as from its epistemological sense, where it refers to the claim to be sole possessor of the truth. *"Sect" as here employed expresses a sociological phenomenon, a withdrawal from the "world" (i.e., from certain areas of social interaction) motivated by the desire to be obedient.*⁶⁸

At the root of this understanding of the church as a sect is the assumption that its members are more "obedient" than members of other religious groups and people in the "world."⁶⁹ Although he claims that his church is not the "sole possessor of the truth," he intimates that his group

few survive. The Mennonites have come to represent the attitude most purely..." (H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* [New York: Harper and Row, 1951], 56).

⁶⁷Yoder, "The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic of the Place of the Disciple in Society," *Concern Pamphlet #1* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern, 1954), 45-68.

⁶⁸Ibid., 46, (italics mine).

⁶⁹For the distinction between church and world, see ch. 1, pp. 10-11.

is the only one "motivated by the desire to be obedient." In the same article, Yoder further defines the church's relation to the world:

[The] social withdrawal here outlined does not equal either divisiveness or exclusiveness in matters of church teaching or church organization. The basic "dissent" of the sect as here spoken of is its refusal to assume responsibility for the moral structure of non-Christian society. Such a refusal correlates, both in logic and in history, with the other-worldly orientation and eschatological expectancy which the Anabaptists displayed. This view may be summed up by saying that the "sectarian" ... does not expect Christian ethics of the non-Christian.⁷⁰

What distinguishes the sect is its Christian ethics. Obedient Christians will at some point withdraw from the "world" in order to be faithful. Yoder says that the sectarianism advocated here is a separation—but not a separation of one "church from other churches." Rather, the church is separate from the world.

In this passage Yoder says his sectarianism is not ecclesiological, i.e., not a separation of one small church from a larger church. He calls it sociological. That is to say, it involves the separation of one group, the church, from another group, the larger society, which is not the church.⁷¹ Harry Huebner, following Stanley Hauerwas, says that Yoder's sectarianism is not sociological. Instead, it is epistemological! What this means is that a

⁷⁰Ibid., 46.

⁷¹Elsewhere, however, he seems to contradict himself by saying that his sectarianism is *not* sociological, which is a term that conjures up too many images of rural withdrawal into ethnic enclaves. "As these essays should be understood as addressed to Christians in general, an not peculiarly 'sectarian,' so also they should be understood not as 'radical' in any modern sense of that term, which places a premium on the far-out and unprecedented, but rather as classical or catholic." Yoder, "Introduction," *The Priestly Kingdom*, 8.

group comes to understand its faith in a corporate manner. Therefore, the group and its identity will necessarily be distinct from other groups.⁷² This leads to the central feature of Yoder's ecclesiology—namely, the description of the church as a morally independent body. This body exercises a social influence on the larger society because of its radical or alternative vision and behaviour. For example, he says "the fulcrum for change and the forum for decision is the moral independence of the believing community as social body."⁷³

In spite of what Yoder says about his view being sectarian, in other cases he makes the claim that his vision is not sectarian. In fact he says that his view of the church is universal. He claims not to be describing the church of only a small group, but the church for all Christians. In this way he sees his ecclesiology as truly catholic. He argues this case at three levels—scriptural, historical, and theological. He claims to be re-creating the vision of the church as it is found in the New Testament. The church is essentially made up of individuals that seek to follow Jesus' path. As we shall see in the next chapter, Yoder sees the canon as the story of the disciples. That is, it is the story of a visible community and how it remembers their beginnings. Hence, the focus today should be on discipleship, community and visibility. This can be seen as sectarian today

⁷²This is not, he adds, to be confused with an epistemological sectarianism that is based on an anti-foundationalist presupposition. See Harry Huebner, "Theology and Moral Agency: The Role of God and Church in Contemporary Christian Ethics," TM [photocopy], obtained from the author, at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1991.

⁷³Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Theology Today* 48 (April 1991): 42.

but really, according to Yoder, it is the true church. This understanding is not limited to Anabaptist or Mennonite churches. In fact, wherever people gather together around a common faith and commitment, that is where the church is. Considered in this way, this view has good ecumenical possibilities, because any church can have some gathered communities.

With reference to church history, Yoder sees the dissent of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century as a faithful re-creation or restoration of the early church. It was not the splitting of one large church into smaller factions. Rather, the Anabaptists began as a faithful segment within the church. They did not leave, according to Yoder, they were forced out instead. In essence then, they were the faithful remnant. Hence, Yoder can call the churches of Anabaptism the true church, and the others are sectarian:⁷⁴

If with the New Testament we understand the unity of the church as a universal bond of faith, we can understand that *the real sectarianism*, in the Biblical sense of unchristian divisiveness, *was the formation of churches bound to the state and identified with the nation*. And on the other hand, some so-called "sects" notably the 16th century Anabaptists, the 17th century Quakers, the 18th century Moravians, and the 19th century Open Brethren, were by their freedom from such ties, by their mobility and their missionary concern, by their preference of Biblicism and obedient faith to creedal orthodoxy, the veritable proponents of ecumenical Christianity.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Menno Simons, writing in 1541, uses the word "sect" to describe Catholics ("Papists"), Lutherans, and Zwinglians (Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed by J.C. Wenger [Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1956], 332-335).

⁷⁵Yoder, "Peace Without Eschatology?", 15, (*italics mine*). This view will be explored in a later chapter.

Already in 1959, when this text was published, Yoder tried to show that the so-called "radicals" were really mainline ecumenists. In chapter six we will pay further attention to Yoder's ecumenical concern.

The third level at which Yoder argues that his view is non-sectarian is theological. He maintains that with the incarnation of Christ a new age has begun. The body of Christ (i.e., the church) exists ambiguously between the old and the new aeons. It exists between the world and the kingdom of God. In spite of this ambiguous existence, however, the church is not the world. With Christ and the possibility of justification/regeneration and sanctification, there is an ontological distinction between the church and the world. On this basis then, Yoder claims that the visible body of believers is the true church, that is, the one true catholic church.⁷⁶

Yoder's ambition is to outline a vision for Christianity, to present a "rediscovery of the Christian vision," if you will. In the sense that this vision is unfamiliar to those "in the world" who do not identify with the person and story of Jesus Christ, this vision is sectarian. But this is only to say that the vision is held by some people and not by others. On the other hand, the vision is not sectarian because Yoder is not suggesting that there is more than one church, but rather he is speaking to all Christians. Yoder likes to use the word "minority" to help explain his task. Christians will be a minority in the world, and thereby they may be seen as sectarian. But this group is made up of all Christians. He can therefore say there really is no sect within the church.

⁷⁶Yoder, "Let the Church be the Church," in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1971), 113-131.

In this chapter we have charted Yoder's development through the years. From early on he gained a respect for fine scholarship and the importance of history. In cooperation with other scholars from the historic peace church tradition, Yoder directed his call to faithfulness to the church at large. He has outlined a particular concept of the church that is based on scripture, the creeds, and which can be traced through history. With this concept of the church Yoder is challenging many others. In the next chapter we will consider the key points of his ecclesiology.

Chapter 3

A Contemporary Anabaptist Ecclesiology of the Visible Church

Having placed Yoder's ecclesiology in relation to others, and having charted some of the history behind such an ecclesiology, the stage is set to take a closer look at his definition of the church. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the terms "church" and "world." In order to connect this analysis to an accepted realm of theological discourse, we will consider how Yoder does or does not fit into the patterns set by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*.¹ Then we will analyze one of Yoder's own extended definitions of the church. He contrasts his Anabaptist understanding with two other dominant views—what he calls the theocratic and spiritualist views. The third part of the chapter will present what Yoder considers to be the marks of the church.

A. The Church and the World

For Yoder, the contrast between the church and the world is crucial.² They are two different realities, and, as we shall see, he considers one more "real" than the other. Yoder insists that one can only understand what the

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951).

²For a definition of church and world see above, ch. 1, pp. 10-11.

world is when one has correctly apprehended the meaning of the church—in his words, the "church precedes the world epistemologically."³

H. Richard Niebuhr saw a significant distinction between the church and the world. He sought to explain not only the nature, but also the history of "the relations of Christianity and civilization."⁴ To do this, he juxtaposed the concepts of "Christ" and "culture." His five answers to this "enduring problem," as he called it, are now classic: Christ *against* culture, Christ *of* culture, Christ *above* culture, Christ and culture *in paradox*, and Christ *the transformer of* culture. Niebuhr placed Mennonites in the first category. He said the

Mennonites have come to represent the attitude [of Christ against culture] most purely, since they not only renounce all participation in politics and refuse to be drawn into military service, but follow their own distinctive customs and regulations in economics and education.⁵

Does Yoder fit into this category? In many respects he does. He has documented well his opposition to military service.⁶ In some regards, he is

³Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11. Compare the similar statement said about Yoder's intellectual colleague: "Hauerwas believes that the world must be understood in terms of the church, not the other way around. The world can be perceived properly only from the standpoint of the church's narrative and its grasp of the truth of the gospel," Duane K. Friesen, "A Critical Analysis of Narrative Ethics," in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 236.

⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Heerewegen Pamphlet Number One. (The Netherlands: Zeist, 1954), reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101-117; *idem*, *Nevertheless: A Meditation on the Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*

in favour of distinct regulations in economics and education. For example, he says Christians should form their own society within a society, which, through its counter-culture character, exhibits a social critique of the prevailing culture and its norms.⁷ To form such a sub-culture the church needs, as Niebuhr indicates, "distinct customs and regulations." But for Yoder this does not necessarily mean that Christians cannot and should not participate in secular institutions. Christians *can* participate in worldly institutions, like governments, universities, public schools, and others. In this sense Yoder does not fit into Niebuhr's category. If he does fit any one of Niebuhr's categories, it would be the one that Niebuhr himself appears to favour, namely, Christ the transformer of culture.⁸

There is little disagreement, within the writings of Yoder and Niebuhr, over a basic definition of what "Jesus" or "Christ" means. Both would agree that, to use Niebuhr's words, "He is a definite person, one and the same whether he appears as man of flesh and blood or as risen Lord. He

(Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971; reprint, Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992; idem, *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); idem, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

⁷See Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, Kans.: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 17, and idem, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 92.

⁸"At first glance John Yoder seems to be a representative of the 'Christ Against Culture' type.... On closer examination, however, Yoder's fundamental attitude toward culture is closer to the conversions type, and therefore to Niebuhr's own attitude, than to the Christ against culture type. That is, Yoder's attitude toward culture is not fundamentally negative" (Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder" [Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1985], 89).

can never be confused with a Socrates, a Plato or an Aristotle,... or even an Amos or Isaiah."⁹ One distinction is that Niebuhr emphasizes the God-like dimension of Jesus and Yoder focuses on the earthly human Jesus. As a result, Niebuhr's ethics are theocentric and Yoder's ethics are Christocentric.¹⁰ Hence, Niebuhr tends to use the word "Christ," and Yoder uses "Jesus." For example, Niebuhr says,

Whatever role he plays in the varieties of Christian experience, it is the same Christ who exercises these various offices.... The teacher of truths about God is the same Christ who is in himself the revelation of the truth.¹¹

Yoder, on the other hand, called one of his major books not the "Politics of Christ," but the *Politics of Jesus*. In the first chapter he writes,

I will attempt to sketch an understanding of Jesus and his ministry of which it might be said that such a Jesus would be of direct significance for social ethics.... I will secondly state the case for considering Jesus, when thus understood, to be not only relevant but also normative for a contemporary Christian social ethic.¹²

These Christological distinctions have a direct affect on ecclesiology. For Niebuhr, Jesus talks about the church and how it is like the kingdom of God. Yoder, on the other hand, says that Jesus *is* the church. That is, Jesus first incarnated God's will for humankind, and the church, insofar as it acts as a community of Jesus's disciples, continues to incarnate God's will for humankind.

⁹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 13.

¹⁰Koontz, "Confessional Theology," 263-264.

¹¹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 13.

¹²Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 23.

Both theologians agree that Christ should be the transformer of culture. They agree on the same end, that is, that culture or the world, should embody the kingdom of God, or come under the reign of God. They differ, however, on the means, that is, the way in which Jesus Christ brings about this end. For Niebuhr, Jesus teaches about the kingdom and how people can be a part of it. For Yoder, Jesus not only teaches about the kingdom, he *embodies* it. As believers follow in Jesus's way, they too embody the kingdom. For Niebuhr, Jesus's faith inspires faith. For Yoder, Jesus's body starts a new body of believers. Unlike Yoder, Niebuhr's Jesus does not inaugurate a new social reality, it was there all the time. Jesus simply opens our eyes to a new faith.

This faith has been introduced into our history, into our culture, our church, our human community, through this person and this event. Now that it has been called forth in us through him we see that it was always there, that without it we should never have lived at all.¹³

Here we see a Jesus who calls Christians to a new way of reasoning, not a new ontological reality. They are still a part of the culture in which they reason. Yoder, on the other hand, interprets the incarnation as the inauguration of a new reality. The church in its very essence is a new sociological reality. The gathered Christian community is, according to Yoder,

pioneering a paradigmatic demonstration of both the power and the practices that define the shape of restored humanity. *The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.*¹⁴

¹³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 255.

¹⁴Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Theology Today* 48/1 (April 1991): 44 (*italics mine*). "They [four

Yoder, like Niebuhr says that Christians exercise a new form of reasoning, a reason that is based on faith in God and Jesus Christ. But, unlike Niebuhr, this is done in the context of a new group, the church, not the same old world. At the conclusion of this chapter we will offer some criticism of these views, and offer a third alternative.

B. Yoder's Tripartite Church Typology

In a major presentation for a conference on the concept of the believers' church, Yoder develops a tripartite typology.¹⁵ This typology serves to distinguish an Anabaptist understanding of the church from what he calls a "theocratic" and a "spiritualist" understanding. The three classical sixteenth-century options can be portrayed in a tri-polar fashion. Each group claimed to be carrying the Reformation to its logical end. The Anabaptists claimed that they were carrying through the aim to restore original Christianity. The spiritualists claimed to carry through the aim of making Christianity independent of externals, focusing on the "true

New Testament writers] proclaim Christ above Culture, but this is the opposite of what Niebuhr designated by that phrase. It is not the world, culture, civilization, which is the definitional category, which the church comes along to embellish with some correctives and complements. The Kingdom of God is the basic category. The rebellious but already in principle defeated cosmos is being invaded and brought to its knees by the Lamb" (Yoder, "That Household we Are," TM [photocopy], prepared for the Conference "Is There a Believers' Church Christology?" Bluffton, Ohio, 1980, General Papers, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana).

¹⁵Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," in *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, ed. James Leo Garrett (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969), 252-283.

inwardness of *faith alone*." Theocratic humanism claimed to carry through God's plan, as spoken through the "prophets," of renewing the whole society.¹⁶

Following Ernst Troeltsch and Franklin H. Littell, Yoder says that each of the three tended to see the other two merge in their common rejection of its own favourite concern.¹⁷ For example, the Anabaptists considered the theocrats and spiritualizers wrong because neither of them took seriously the call to create a visible community that challenges society. The spiritualizers saw the Anabaptists and theocrats as both being too concerned with outward forms. Theocrats Zwingli and Calvin saw the Anabaptists and spiritualizers as alike in their "wrongheaded divisiveness and their undermining of Christian government. They shared the error of Martin Luther in his rejection of the theocratic vision and his relegation of government to a realm outside the gospel."¹⁸

After he presents the three classical options, Yoder chooses one. Not surprisingly, he prefers the Anabaptist vision or the Believers' church type. "We shall claim," says Yoder, "that the church is called to move beyond the oscillation between the theocratic and the spiritualist patterns, not to a compromise between the two or to a synthesis claiming like Hegel to 'assume' them both, but to what is genuinely a third option."¹⁹ On this emphasis Yoder has been consistent. For example, twenty-two years later

¹⁶Ibid., 254-255.

¹⁷Ibid., 256, and Franklin H. Littell, "Church and Sect (With Special Reference to Germany)," *The Ecumenical Review* 6 (April 1954): 262-276.

¹⁸Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," 255.

¹⁹Ibid., 257.

he makes essentially the same point.

The "concept of the believers' church," then, is not a mere midpoint on a scale between establishment and chaos, not a *via media* between too much tradition and too little. It is a type *sui generis*, which... keeps arising again and again, in every century, taking on similar shapes, *mutatis mutandis*.²⁰

Given three classical options for portraying the church, Yoder selects only one. Perhaps the church would be better served with a totally new paradigm—a creative combination of these three options would create a more comprehensive and more ecumenical model. One could formulate a view which would incorporate the best of each pattern and avoid the mistakes each group has made. For example, such a paradigm would use the theocratic vision for the rule of God in society and craft a view of the church which embraces the world and society in a more positive way, thereby dispelling charges of sectarianism. With the spiritualists, one would add the inner dimension, and develop a more inclusive ecclesiology, like, for example, the Quaker ability to see the "God within" each person. From the Anabaptists one would add the importance of Christian commitment to a community, which reinforces values and provide support for living out God's will in society.

C. Contemporary Anabaptist View of the Church

To facilitate the presentation of Yoder's concept of the church we will present what he gives as the marks of the church. As associate editor of *Concern: A Pamphlet Series*, Yoder published an article entitled "What are

²⁰Yoder, "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65,1 (January 1991): 11-12.

Our Concerns?"²¹ In this article he outlines his concerns for the Anabaptist-Mennonite church in particular. Yoder frames his answer around seven attributes of the church: *discipleship, congregational centrality, authority of the Bible, separation from the world, missionary quality, Spirit-led, and ecumenicity*. These seven attributes have become themes throughout the larger body of Yoder's writings.

Discipleship. Yoder says that "the Church is the fellowship of those who have responded to the call of discipleship."²² Next to the concept of the church, discipleship is the most important theme running through Yoder's work. He is writing what can be properly called theological ethics, which is really a working out of Christian discipleship.²³ For Yoder, discipleship "denotes a synthesis of fellowship with God and obedience to His will, as revealed in Christ."²⁴ This is meant to avoid the dangers, on the one hand, of legalism and liberalism which would focus on obedience, and a kind of "Lutheranism" on the other hand, which according to Yoder, "is interested in achieving fellowship with God but not primarily with

²¹Yoder, "What are Our Concerns?", *Concern Pamphlet #4* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern 1957), 20-32.

²²*Ibid.*, 21.

²³He defines discipleship elsewhere with four subheadings—obedience, communion, imitation, and cross. Cf., Yoder and David A. Shank, "Biblicism and the Church," *Concern Pamphlet #2* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern 1955), 28.

²⁴Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 21-22. Cf., Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 232.

obedience."²⁵ In this regard, Yoder follows his teacher Harold S. Bender, the one who brought the Anabaptist vision to the minds of twentieth-century academics.

First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. ... They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience. ... The great word of the Anabaptists was not "faith" as it was with the reformers, but "following" (*Nachfolge Christi*).²⁶

Being a Christian always involves a cost. To follow in the way of Christ requires a type of obedience which is often counter to culture and necessarily invites scorn or suffering.

Related to discipleship, which must be outward, is Yoder's insistence that the church be a visible body. He has several reasons for insisting that the church be visible. For example it relates to his concept of witness, faithfulness, and incarnation. It is discipleship which will result in a visible body of believers.

Christians have traditionally distinguished between the visible church and the invisible church, between the spirit and the body, between the ordained and the laity, between love and justice. We may now come to see that a more useful and a more biblical distinction would be ... between the basic personal postures of men, some of whom confess and others of whom do not confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.²⁷

²⁵Yoder, "What are our Concerns?" 22-23. Also see *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 40, where Yoder says that, as a test of faith, discipleship is more important than doctrine.

²⁶Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in *Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy S. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957), 42-43.

²⁷Yoder, "Let the Church be the Church," *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 115-116.

Here we have a clear distinction between who is a "believer" and who is not, i.e., one who confesses to a group of like-minded people that he or she is willing to follow the precepts of Jesus as understood by that group.

Yoder maintains that Christian ethics are for Christians. Those who are not Christians cannot be expected to exhibit a higher morality. This includes having the interest of the other before one's self, sharing one's wealth with those in need, and refusing to use a violent course of action to resolve conflict. Christians are able to do this because they have support in the form of affirmation, exhortation, and commitment of the community, and the empowering presence of Holy Spirit.

Congregational Centrality. Yoder insists that the "unit of action and authority in the church is the local congregation."

We locate the reality we call the "church" not so much in a personage executing sacramental acts or in the hierarchy administering canonical structures, as in the people themselves who gather around Jesus and celebrate their unity by belonging to one another as well as to the same Lord.²⁸

He bases this on the form of the early church and on the visible dissent and congregational autonomy demonstrated by the early Anabaptists. Lodging ecclesial authority within the congregation has several benefits. It keeps the church from being locked into rigid patterns of doctrinalism, it allows for differences according to regions, and it identifies the church with the congregation.²⁹

²⁸Yoder, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, Ont.: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1979), 5.

²⁹Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 23.

Virtually all church functions occur within the congregation. One key phrase in this regard is "binding and loosing." This phrase, which is taken from Matthew 18, refers to the process within a congregation of valuing things differently according to the faith and what is read in Scriptures.³⁰ "To 'bind' is to enjoin, to forbid or make obligatory; to 'loose' is to leave free, to permit."³¹ In Jesus's day this process of moral discernment and correction was usually for rabbis only, but Jesus assigns it to his disciples as well. "Binding and loosing" is for Yoder the way members in the church make commitments to one another and hold each other accountable to those commitments—it is a way of discipling. A second key phrase is "the multiplicity of ministry." This refers to the idea that each person within the congregation is gifted and contributes to the ministry within the group.³² This is contrasted with other models which have graduate schools provide pastors who are distributed to the local assemblies by national headquarters. Yoder criticizes the notion of having a group of professionals run the local church. He is opposed to the popular model of having a single, paid (often male) pastor who serves as a ministerial jack-of-all-

³⁰See for example, Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 323-358 (originally published as *Concern Pamphlet #14* [Scottsdale Pa.: Concern, 1967], 2-43); and *The Priestly Kingdom*, 26-28, 93.

³¹Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 327. "Perhaps the very fact that the terms no longer have a customary sense in current language may permit us to use them now as a 'technical' label for the practice Jesus commanded" (ibid.).

³²See Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1987). The whole book is devoted to this topic.

trades—he preaches, counsels, teaches, visits the elderly, and inspires the youth. Not only is this an impossible portfolio for one person, he says that it also is not biblical.³³

There are some functions which are better performed by structures outside of the congregation. A denominational body ("Mennonite branch, pan-Mennonite, or any other Roman or non-Roman super-congregational body"³⁴) can be a forum for consolidating relief efforts, it can offer counseling and advice for congregations, and it can reduce overlapping and waste.³⁵ Yoder stresses, however, that the denominational body is not a church. "What disquiets us in certain Mennonite circles is not false theory about the Church so much as the assumption in practice, that when we say "the Church" we mean our organization."³⁶ The church is a body of believers who can hold one another accountable to their commitments. This cannot happen in a denomination.

Authority of the Bible. Every church considers the Bible to be authoritative. The distinguishing feature for Yoder is the way in which the Bible exercises authority within the church. Some groups have an orthodox set of interpretations, others select professionals who interpret and disseminate the truth.

The Roman Church reads the Bible within the walls of her teaching authority, and expects no revelation. The reformers really looked for revelation, i.e., for final authority, but only in

³³Ibid., ch. 2.

³⁴Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 24.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

terms of the questions they asked it. The same was true of Müntzer and the Münsterites. The Anabaptists differed in that they had sufficient detachment not only to ask the Bible their own questions, but to ask the Bible what questions the Bible was meant to answer.³⁷

Yoder agrees with the Anabaptists who, according to him, were able to live out the fact that the Bible held authority. The community of believers "replaced the hierarchy and the theologians as the agent responsible for putting questions to Scripture."³⁸ As if the Anabaptists were the only ones who had a hermeneutical circle, Yoder says that,

The other approaches led to orthodoxy, which means a stopping point attained; ... The Anabaptists came quickly to definite positions, but by a more circular and less final study process; Scripture's answer to the first question is carried to the church and thus serves to formulate a new question for which an answer must be sought, thus progressively purging out of the system one's unconscious presuppositions and getting more objectively at what the Bible itself is interested in.³⁹

Yoder himself admits that this is a tall order for any community to do. The Anabaptists eventually developed an orthodoxy of their own.

Yoder strives to let the Bible have authority. His *Politics of Jesus* is one example of this. But Yoder is not without his own presuppositions. As is the case for all of us, his answers are a reflection of the questions he has

³⁷Ibid., 24-25.

³⁸Ibid., 25. "Dialogue at the bar of the Word of God was the demand of Hubmaier's first three publications. It is the collective modality of the Rule of Christ which he, together with Luther and Bucer, Grebel and Sattler, trusted as the instrument for renewing not only the pastoral care of persons but also the shape of the community" (Yoder, "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65,1 [January 1991]: 19).

³⁹Ibid.

asked. A difficulty arises when the theologian (including a Mennonite one) becomes a professional and finds it hard to share questions and conclusions with the congregation. The congregation in turn finds it hard, if not impossible, to affect the questions the theologians ask. More will be said about how Yoder understands Scripture and the task of interpretation in the next chapter.

Separation from the World. Yoder claims a certain uniqueness for historic Anabaptism:

One of the great theological originalities of the Anabaptists was that only they, of all the branches of the Reformation, gave any theological meaning to the concept "world." The Constantinian churches could not speak meaningfully of the "world" since they had baptized it into the church.⁴⁰

The church is a fellowship of disciples covenanted to each other under the "Lordship of Christ."⁴¹ Everyone who is not a part of such a local congregation is outside of the church and therefore "in the world."⁴² The new aeon has come with the incarnation of God. Those who choose to participate in it leave the old aeon, i.e. the world, and become co-heirs with Christ of the new world.

⁴⁰Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 27-28.

⁴¹"The theme already identified is in one sense central to all the others: If the church were not a voluntary minority community none of the other things we say about her nature and mission would have any foundation" (Yoder, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," 4).

⁴²Hans J. Hillerbrand makes a similar observation in his "The Anabaptist View of the State," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 32/2 (April 1958): 109ff. For the Anabaptists, "the 'world' takes on almost sociological and geographical dimensions and does not fall—as with Luther—into the inside of the Christian individual with the *simil justus, simil peccator* doctrine. Or, to use Augustine's terminology, the *civitas terrena* becomes *civitas diaboli*."

From this understanding of the separation of the church and the world Yoder develops an understanding of other matters such as non-resistance, eschatology, voluntary church membership, missions, nonconformity, and the state.⁴³ This is perhaps the place where Yoder is mostly clearly sectarian. He rarely states the church-world separation so plainly. A quick and natural conclusion to emphasizing the separation between church and world is that one must *withdraw* from the realm of the world to enter into the church. Yoder cannot retract such statements because the rest of his theology hinges on such an understanding between the church and world. He does however go to great lengths to soften the blow. Twenty-seven years later he still tries to explain the subtlety,

That discipleship means social withdrawal is a caricature projected by Troeltsch and the Niebuhrs, on grounds related to their own assumptions, not drawn from historical facts. By definition the disciple, like his/her Lord, is in the world although not of it.⁴⁴

To be separate and yet not withdraw is a tension throughout Yoder's work which is not always satisfactorily resolved. Perhaps it cannot be, for, as Yoder says, the old aeon and the new aeon overlap in the present time.⁴⁵

⁴³Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 28.

⁴⁴Yoder, "Introduction," *The Priestly Kingdom*, 11. Cf., "The need is not, as some current popularizers would suggest, for most Christians to get out of the church and into the world. They have been in the world all the time. The trouble is that they have been *of* the world too. The need is for what they do in the world to be different because they are Christian; to be a reflection ... of the social novelty of the covenant of grace," *idem.*, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," 264.

⁴⁵"The present historical period is characterized by the coexistence of two ages or aeons. The essential difference between the two aeons is not temporal, since they coexist; it is more a matter of direction. The present aeon is characterized by sin and centered on man; the coming aeon is the

Yoder offers some reasons why he thinks the church should take a distinct social form. First of all, on the pragmatic level, Yoder says that "it is self-evident that there can be no procedure of proclamation without a community, distinct from the rest of society, to do the proclaiming."⁴⁶ Secondly, one needs a distinct group of believers so that there will be a body into which people can be called to fellowship. Third, and on another level, he says it is within the nature of the gospel itself for the church to exist as a distinct group in society.

If it is not the case that there are in a given place men of various characters and origins who have been brought together in Jesus Christ, then there is not in that place the new humanity and in that place the gospel is not true. If, on the other hand, this miracle of new creation has occurred, then all the verbalizations and interpretations whereby this brotherhood communicates to the world around it are simply explications of the fact of its presence.⁴⁷

This third reason essentially states that the gospel is only true if people come together and form a fellowship in the name of Jesus Christ.

Some of these reasons can be challenged. The so-called pragmatic reason says that a voice of proclamation must come from an individual or group of individuals. But there is no need for these individuals to come from a Believers' church and not an established church. In fact, many

redemptive reality which entered history in an ultimate way in Christ.... The old has already begun to be superseded by the new" (Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 9; cf., "Peace Without Eschatology?" [Scottsdale, Pa.: Concern Reprint, 1959], 9). For a further discussion on eschatology see pp. 120 ff. below.

⁴⁶Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," 259.

⁴⁷Ibid., 259-260.

proclamations, which Yoder himself says can and should take the form of social critique,⁴⁸ come from the mainline churches (e.g., in Canada, PLURA—Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Church, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches⁴⁹). Secondly, to insist that the group be distinct so that there is a place into which new converts can come makes sense. But one need not insist that the distinct body must be a Believers' church. New converts regularly join the Anglican church. These reasons alone do not make a strong enough case for the church to take an Anabaptist or believers' church form.

The Church has a Missionary Quality. The affirmation that the church has a missionary wing to its body is well accepted. This affirmation historically has taken a different expression in an Anabaptist tradition. Because of their small size and distinct boundaries, local congregations often had a "mission field" right in their own community, or just beyond its borders.⁵⁰ If the church is understood as a faithful minority then its potential mission field is both near and far. With the existing separation of church and state, there is no *Landeskirche* (territorial church) which, says Yoder, "by definition ... cannot do mission work."⁵¹

Part of the missionary message is that the Christ has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He invites people to enter the new reality,

⁴⁸Cf., Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 36.

⁴⁹Cf. John R. Williams, ed. *Canadian Churches & Social Justice* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre and James Lorimer & Co., 1984).

⁵⁰"A minority ethic must also be a missionary ethic" (Yoder, "Radical Reformation Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 118).

⁵¹Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 28. See also his "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," 4ff.

which is the church (as here defined). A further aspect of the message is to challenge the existing structures when they oppress people or fail to keep their mandate.⁵²

The Church is Spirit-led. This dimension of Yoder's ecclesiology is perhaps the least emphasized. The church being "led by the spirit" means that members gather in small groups to perform various tasks of the church (e.g., to discern how to interpret the Bible, to decide what to do with an erring member, to respond to crises in the larger society). They listen to each other with the intent to reach a consensus that "feels right" according to them and what they deem as the Holy Spirit working within the group. Also, the Spirit enables individuals and groups to do things which otherwise would not be possible. That is, with the Spirit's leading and support, the group can exhibit an exceptional level of morality, selfless love, and suffer ridicule and condemnation from others.⁵³

The Church is Ecumenical. It has already been made clear that Yoder does have a serious concern to be ecumenical. This concern is in part based

⁵²If the aim is to testify to the world a common Christian unity, then involvement in the ecumenical movement can be seen as a kind of missionary effort. Furthermore, if an ecumenical endeavour involves proclaiming a Christian message, then it can be considered as a missionary effort as well. The following statement can be considered as such, *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991). This statement was prepared by Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop, and Yoder as "a contribution to ecumenical dialogue sponsored by Church of the Brethren, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Mennonite Central Committee [and] Friends General Conference" (p.3).

⁵³Cf., "But Christian ethics calls for behaviour which is impossible except by the miracles of the Holy Spirit," Yoder, "Let the Church be the Church," *The Original Revolution*, 121.

on a missionary desire to see all people unite. It is also a part of what he believes to be the church. At the most immediate level the church is a local congregation. A group of congregations may form a denomination, which itself is not a church, but helps the congregations to more efficiently and expertly perform their churchly functions.

Yoder recognizes that churches from other denominations are "sister-churches." Already in his 1955 paper he sketched his views on this matter:

The way in which Christians and churches should have fraternal relations with one another are numerous:

- a. common work in service and witness
- b. common worship
- c. acquaintance with one another's concerns and needs
- d. reciprocal admonition where one or the other (or both) is wrong
- e. organizational union or federation in limited cases

Only under the first of these heads is there any reason for stopping at the denominational level, and then even it depends on the specific job at hand; in all other respects mentioned unity is a positive Christian duty, except for the last.⁵⁴

Because of restrictions inherent in the established churches, Yoder says that free-churches are the ones that can be truly ecumenical. "Territorial or confessional churches cannot by definition be ecumenical; the most they can do is recognize one another as being *also* valid churches."⁵⁵ Because Yoder has defined the church in terms of believers gathering in local congregations, and not in terms of church structures and organizations, he can say that his view is truly ecumenical. Moreover, he says that the free-church "mission emphasis and their refusal of national loyalties made

⁵⁴Yoder, "What are our Concerns?", 29.

⁵⁵Ibid., 29.

them truly ecumenical years before the movement which bears the name."⁵⁶

Criticism. Is the church of Jesus Christ a new reality, as Yoder says? Or is it a new faith for a new life in the same reality, as Niebuhr says? To say the church is entirely new disregards the fact that God's redemptive presence is and has been elsewhere, like, for example, in the lives of those in the Old Testament. However, to say that Jesus Christ instills faith in others through the power of his own faith seems incomplete. To be sure, this faith changes the life of a believer. As believers rally together they do become (in a *de facto* manner) a new community in the world. But what distinguishes this group from any other group of humans who passionately share a common interest? The transcendent dimension of the church in this view is minimized.

Perhaps a middle ground can be found by appealing to Paul Tillich's concept of the Spiritual Community.⁵⁷ This community is not directly equated with the church. Rather, it is "a power and a structure inherent and effective in... religious communities."⁵⁸ The Spiritual Community is the essential church. But because the church as we know it exists in time and space, it lives a paradoxical life: at times it *is* the essential church, the Spiritual Community; at other times, however, it is not. It acts in a manner which is as self-serving and destructive as any other sociological body. The

⁵⁶Ibid., 30.

⁵⁷See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 3, Life and the spirit of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1963, 162-245.

⁵⁸Ibid., 162

Spiritual Community incorporates both the power of Jesus's faith and the new community. But Tillich does not absolutize that new community, that is, the church. The church can only fragmentarily actualize the Spiritual Community. The church cannot become the Spiritual Community because of human limitations, finitude, human choice, and the reality of sin. This understanding of the nature of the church has two strengths. First, it legitimately holds the ideal for which the church should strive. Such ideals include faith, love, holiness, unity and universalism.⁵⁹ Second, it accounts for the fact that the church is not perfect—it cannot be—because of the “ambiguities of the religious life.”⁶⁰

Yoder's vision for the church is broad and ambitious. His point of view is, however always a particular one. He bases his view on a certain reading of the Bible. In fact, the *way* in which Yoder views the Bible is as important as the message he finds in it. In the next chapter we will discover that Yoder's hermeneutic is both the foundation and the springboard for his ecclesiology.

⁵⁹Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 3*, 167-172.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 165.

Chapter 4

The Hermeneutical Task of the Gathered Community: Shaping the Canon with Communal Memory

This chapter will show that Yoder's hermeneutic is shaped by his ecclesiology. First of all, he considers scripture itself to be the living memory of a church community. The text, which we now know as the Old Testament and New Testament, has authority because it is the faithful record of that community, not because God somehow magically inspired some writers to produce timeless texts. Secondly, each community must interact with the Jesus story to discover what it means to be a faithful disciple in the contemporary setting. A definite strength of this view is that it accounts for the diversity found within the New Testament—each community was different, had different questions, and had its own selective memory. A weakness is that Yoder tolerates only the amount of diversity that falls within his own concept of the canon. This chapter will argue that this diversity can be expanded and therefore have a greater ecumenical impact.

The chapter is divided into three parts: The first part will discuss the meaning of the canon and outline Yoder's presentation of three differing views, Catholic, Protestant, and modern. The second part will discuss Yoder's own understanding of "canon." This will aid the discussion in the third part which will be guided by four questions: What does one consider

the canon to be? What questions do we ask of scripture? What do we understand when we understand scripture? and What is the role of other sources for doing ethics?¹

A. Yoder's Portrayal of Other Views of the Canon

Yoder understands the canon in two different ways. First, the canon is the set of criteria which were used to gather a body of texts. In this sense, it acts as a ruler, or measuring stick, as the Latin word *canon* suggests.² Second, that body of texts in turn functions as a criterion for the church "to judge herself by her origin."³ Yoder understands the canon to be a "very human, very historical thing, a very fuzzy thing on the edges."⁴ To gain a better understanding of what Yoder means by the canon and its creation, we will first consider how he views other working definitions of canon. In an essay, "The Authority of the Canon," he contrasts his view with three others: Tridentine Catholic, Protestant Scholastic, and Modern.⁵

Tridentine Catholic. Only after the challenge by the Protestant Reformation could Catholicism define itself in an anti-Protestant sense.

¹Allen Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 4 (January 1978): 28-39.

²Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, Pa., Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1985), 214.

³Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, Ind.: Goshen Biblical Seminary, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 1982), 116.

⁴*Ibid.*, 117.

⁵Yoder, "The Authority of the Canon," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 265-290.

This definition happened at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and asserted the Catholic understanding of authority. In this view, authority is found both in scripture and tradition, which are interpreted by the church. Yoder writes,

Pushed into a corner by early Protestant appeals to the Bible as the Word of God, the [Tridentine Catholic] doctrine affirmed that there are two relatively independent channels of divine revelation. One was written in Holy Scripture in the early centuries. ... The other is the parallel channel carrying information not yet written (or written in texts not recognized as Holy Scripture) from which at any later time the teaching church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, may draw to define further doctrines.⁶

In this view ecclesial authority is open-ended, and further interpretation lies chiefly in the hands of the hierarchy. Moreover, this view assumes that the scriptures are not always clear on their significance for the church—another reason for the need for official interpretation.⁷

Protestant Scholastic. This view finds its roots in the development of Protestant scholasticism in the seventeenth century. Yoder writes,

In the face of the double challenge of Rome and reason, [Protestant Scholastic] orthodoxy worked through to a total system the claim that Scripture is the foundation of the church.⁸

The challenge of Rome came from its emphasis on two authorities—Holy

⁶Ibid., 267.

⁷One contemporary example of such a view is seen in John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977). He sees the authority of the Church and of the Bible as being intertwined. "It would be hard to say, however, that one is more ultimate than the other. The Church produced the New Testament and settled its canon. Yet, having done so, it also in a sense made itself subject to the New Testament," 417.

⁸Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 266.

scripture and church doctrine. The challenge of reason came from the nascent Enlightenment and its "glorification of natural human reason and the capacity of critical doubt to test everything, relativizing all arguments from authority except the appeal to reason itself."⁹

The answer to these challenges was a glorification of scripture. The argument proceeds as follows: Biblical literature was written in a manner unlike any other, that is, it alone was divinely inspired. The language of the Bible is unique and therefore "not to be measured by the grammar and spelling rules of other language."¹⁰ The establishment of the canon was viewed to be guided by the Holy Spirit in a special way. This process of establishing the canon is considered to be a revelatory event. The preservation of the Scriptural texts is seen to be providential. Scripture can be read and understood by the average reader and does not need the authoritative interpretation by the church as claimed by the Tridentine Catholic view. The principles found within the Bible apply to all ages.

The Protestant Scholastic vision included the development of "confessional documents" and "dogmatic compendia" which became important in order to make the message of scripture relevant to the time. These were considered to be "substantially equivalent to scripture itself and [to] share indirectly in its authority." "Hermeneutics," in the Protestant Scholastic view, "was the name given to the process of lifting the timeless truths from the occasional and unimportant context, dehistoricizing and

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

systematizing them."¹¹

An example of this can be seen in Yoder's critique of evangelicals' use of the Bible. He asks,

How often in recent years have we read articles or have heard sermons on such themes as "the biblical view of ..." or "the biblical mandate for ..." And yet what followed was not an inductive biblical study, was not derived from a particular text, was not the fruit of a new testing of the witness of Scripture, but rather assumed the general evangelical stance which the community already held, and knew that his listeners or readers also held, and then related the known values and familiar phrases of that stance to the new question.¹²

Yoder dislikes "timeless truths" and the process of theological "dehistoricizing." As we shall see, he prefers a more contextual and narrative approach.

Modern View. This view does not develop a new understanding of the canon. It questions the possibility of even having a canon. The modern scholar, with the methods of literary and historical criticism, "proved" that many of the assumptions of the Protestant Scholastic view are wrong. For example,

it did not take historical scholarship long to demonstrate that the lists of accepted Scriptures were compiled late, that for many centuries they were contested, and that they were initially established on the basis of debatable factual judgments, such as the (perennial sample) assumption that the epistle to the Hebrews belongs in the New Testament because the apostle Paul wrote it.¹³

¹¹Ibid., 268.

¹²Yoder, "The Biblical Mandate," presented at a workshop "Evangelicals and Social Concern," from a photocopied manuscript received from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries Library, Elkhart, Indiana. It was later published in *The Chicago Declaration*, ed., Ron Sider, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1974), 88-116.

¹³Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 269-270.

Hence, this view is marked by skepticism and confidence in human reason.

Yoder challenges the Tridentine Catholic notion of two sources of authority. He challenges the Protestant Scholastic notion of one miraculous source—the timeless inspired truth of scripture. He also challenges the skepticism of the Modern view which, because there are some inconsistencies, abandons the whole enterprise of searching for truth within scripture.

B. Yoder's Understanding of the Canon

Yoder wants to find a way not only to account for but to *embrace* these "embarrassing" contradictions discovered by modern biblical scholarship. He does this by shifting the authority from the text to the event. Authority comes not from what is written in the canon. Rather the canon is authoritative because it is a reliable report of the main events in the history of God's people. This at once can be recognized as a narrative approach. That is, it focuses on the story of a people. Put another way, Christians are people of the story, not people of the Word.

"We must find some way to affirm that that redaction process is not treasonous, and that what it did to the tradition must be recognized as somehow also true."¹⁴ Yoder has found a way to do this. It "might be called an historical modulation of the sociology of knowledge."¹⁵ That is, he applies contemporary research on the social construction of reality to the origin and early history of the church. What does it mean "for any human

¹⁴Ibid., 273.

¹⁵Ibid., 281.

movement, deriving its identity from a limited set of foundational events, to seek to be faithful to the meaning of those events within the flux of historical (which means changing) existence?"¹⁶ If a group of people recognizes the same events as being of ultimate importance, as time passes they begin to construct a collective memory of those events. As the memory is passed on from generation to generation it is accompanied by its accepted (i.e., orthodox) interpretations, and set apart from other false interpretations (i.e., heresy).

The foundational event of Christianity is, for Yoder, God's entering history by becoming particular in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁷ Within the New Testament we see the development of a community that bases itself on this foundational event. We see a community of Christians remembering that Jesus is their norm. Their literature is a reflection of a norming process that needs to occur within a community. This process includes a development which results in the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. Each community, with its own peculiar challenges and struggles, has its own way of "reaching back" to that founding event, and forming its thoughts and basing its actions upon that.

Thus every new expression, including the trajectory of Christian reformulation in later redaction, is at the same time a new effort of the author to reach back to Jesus. That is why it is authoritative, ... because it has reformulated the appeal to Jesus once more from a new, later perspective and thereby sharpened the claim that Jesus is

¹⁶Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 281.

¹⁷For Christians there are several significant historical events. Biblical faith is rooted in these events, "especially the events from the Exodus to Pentecost," Ibid., 275.

authority even a decade or a generation later.¹⁸

Within the canonical literature we see a diversity of views regarding the Christian life and community. This diversity is as natural and normal as it is for each community to have different problems and concerns. As communities strive to be faithful, they must reach back and be guided by the "bar of scripture."¹⁹

This organic understanding of the canon is as different from the Protestant Scholastic view as a growing vine is different from a sturdy fence post. The post is planted firmly in the ground.

Its orientation is unambivalent and one cannot go beyond it. This would represent the [Protestant Scholastic] orthodox vision of the authority of canonical Scriptures, roughly equivalent to a closed system of propositional truths, unchanging except for translation into different languages.²⁰

The vine, on the other hand, is growing and constantly reaching out and changing. Unlike the post, the vine has roots, from which it stems. Each branch is as genuine as the next. Yet if all were left to grow, the vine would soon develop into a thicket, bearing less and less fruit as it is choked. This, according to Yoder is similar to the "Catholic vision of organic progression in many directions without firm restraints."²¹

If the vine is properly pruned, however, it will grow strong and produce fruit. The process of pruning is important. Yoder says the roots

¹⁸Ibid., 284.

¹⁹Ibid., 280. See also "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65,1 (January 1991): 5-19.

²⁰Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 289.

²¹Ibid.

stand in judgment on the branches. They decide which, for the sake of the whole, get cut off.

This, I would suggest, is like the historically realistic Protestant understanding of canon. The fact that there are several branches and not simply a post or a single tree trunk is affirmed. We do not work with the vision of one undifferentiated body of coherent propositional affirmations, but with the affirmation of one coherent organism, all of whose branches are genuinely and authentically derived from and dependent upon the root; all are subject to being judged by the closeness of relationship to the root.²²

With this imagery Yoder explains the difference between the Gospels, the letters and other literature in the New Testament. They each have a different tone, expression, and emphasis. But each part is connected to the whole by its reference back to that common truth claim that Jesus is the Christ.

Remembering is key to Yoder's understanding of the canon. Reality is shaped by memory. The people of God shape their distinct reality as they continue to keep alive the memory of the incarnation. The Bible has authority for the life of the church precisely because this is its aim: to keep remembering. This is unlike the Protestant Scholastic vision of authority based on a doctrine of inspiration. This is unlike the Tridentine Catholic derivation of authority from a doctrine of the church. The authority of scripture, from Yoder's perspective, comes from its ability to remain faithful to that one truth claim, to the foundational event, to the Jesus of history as norm.

A word needs to be said about the phrase "canon within a canon." In a literal sense, Yoder holds the story of Jesus to be a "canon within the

²²Ibid., 289-290.

canon." In other words, he allows an inner canon, i.e. faithfulness to Jesus, to stand over against the larger canon, i.e. Genesis to Revelation.

There is nothing arbitrary or pietistic in saying that the story of Jesus is the canon within the Christian canon. An inner canon can be arbitrary, as in Luther's "*was Christum treibet*" or with the pietist's Christ. But it can also be a formally responsible statement.²³

What is the content of this inner canon? Yoder sums up the message of the New Testament as follows:

A social style characterized by the creation of a new community and the rejection of violence of any kind is the theme of New Testament proclamation from beginning to end, from right to left.²⁴

"This provides the warrant for his moves from scripture to moral claims throughout [his book, *The Politics of Jesus*]. The christological judgment here focuses on the historical Jesus as teacher and pattern; this Jesus is what one understands when one understands the New Testament. Movements in argument can be tested by the consistency with that understanding."²⁵

Critical interlude. What is of value in Yoder's presentation is that he distinguishes between three approaches to scripture—the Catholic approach (what he calls the Tridentine Catholic), which has its two sources of textual authority,²⁶ that is, scripture and church tradition; the Protestant

²³Ibid., 285. "The truth which is in Jesus is the truth that matters the most" (Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985], 117).

²⁴Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 250.

²⁵Allen Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 4 (January 1978): 32.

²⁶"Textual authority" here means that the biblical texts have authority in conjunction with the official church interpretation. I say "textual

(or Protestant Scholastic) approach which lifts out the inspired, eternal truths from scripture and holds them as authoritative; and his own narrative historical view, which gives authority to scripture only insofar as it reminds the community of believers about the life and teachings Jesus and his prescriptions for the church. His own view is helpful because it keeps the texts authoritative yet does not make them divine. By pointing to the Christ event and appealing to the remembrance of that event, he allows the text to be organic and even what some in the 20th century would call inconsistent.

Conversely, it can be said that Yoder has drawn his categories too cleanly. One can use some of his own concepts to broaden what he says to include the other views alongside his own. He says that the Catholic approach is like a vine which has grown untended into a thicket, in many directions, without firm restraints, and which "bears less and less fruit as it is choked."²⁷ At the same time he says that the Catholic approach sets church tradition alongside scripture and looks to it for authority as well. This seems to be a contradiction. Does not this church tradition place "firm restraints" upon the interpretation of scripture? It would seem so. Catholics have their own way of remembering the story of Jesus and taking him as norm. Granted, this takes a different track than what Yoder likes, but just because it is different does not make it erroneous. Yoder has written elsewhere about the varieties of church traditions and how each

authority" to distinguish the authority of the Bible from other sources for doing theology, e.g., Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

²⁷Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 289.

one has its own story which it calls faithful and true, and the others are heretical.²⁸ In this case, the Christian tradition is made relative by the human community and the way it remembers. Instead of rejecting other views as heretical, as Yoder is prone to do, this is grounds for accepting them.²⁹ To continue the metaphor of the vine, the Catholic church, along with other churches, is also out in the garden pruning the vine of scripture and its interpretation. The difference is in the gardener. Yoder would have the vine pruned more aggressively, and others would allow more branches to grow. Yoder says that the Catholic vine is choking out its fruit. But just as Yoder appeals to a sociology of knowledge to describe the Anabaptist formation of their canon, one can make the same sociological statements to describe another ecclesial group. In the same way Yoder says that Jesus is the foundational event, others could say the texts written about Jesus and the early church are foundational, simply because the group believes it and says so. For Yoder to say that the Catholic vision of organic progression is "without firm restraints" is perhaps a bit narrow. He does not recognize that the Catholic vision has its own restraints. It has its own style of pruning, as it were, and it is simply different and therefore acceptable.

Yoder's other image for Scriptural authority is that of a post.³⁰ This

²⁸Cf., Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 118.

²⁹This is an argument similar to the one George Lindbeck makes in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). Using Lindbeck's three categories of doctrine—cognitive, experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic—I would propose with Lindbeck, that for ecumenical reasons, one should take a cultural-linguistic approach to theology and doctrine.

³⁰"A post firmly planted in the ground at one place will never move or change. Its orientation is unambivalent and one cannot go beyond it.

image is not entirely negative, as Yoder suggests. A post, if planted securely, is firm and dependable. It serves as a foundation. If the post supports part of a fence, to extend the metaphor, the fence would fall over, and be useless, were not the post secure and stable. Referring to the Protestant Scholastic approach to scripture as a post therefore has a positive side. In fact, those timeless propositional truths themselves serve as the foundational event for those Protestant groups that claim them. Actually, there are ways in which Yoder's own proposal is post-like in character. He has his own set of propositional truths. For example, part of Yoder's indispensable doctrine is to see Jesus as a historical figure, to consider his life as an ethical norm, and to see the early church community as being faithful to Jesus's vision. In this case it would be more inclusive to imagine that the church's hermeneutical task is more like building a fence than placing a fence-post. The variety of traditions, including the Anabaptist ones, have their own posts. Across these various posts are fastened the planks of commonalty, like the Bible, Jesus Christ, the church and its tradition. Each group will paint the planks a different colour, but, there is enough commonalty in this image to hold the fence together.

C. The Form and Function of the Canon in the Community

Several years ago Allen Verhey produced an insightful bibliographic

This would represent the HPS [Protestant Scholastic] orthodox vision of the authority of canonical Scriptures, roughly equivalent to a closed system of propositional truths, unchanging except for translation into different languages" (Yoder, "The Authority of the Canon," 289).

article called, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics."³¹ He compares Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist uses of scripture. He does so by asking four questions: What does one consider the canon to be? What questions do we ask of scripture? What do we understand when we understand scripture? and What is the role of other sources for doing ethics? I will use these questions to form a critique of Yoder's understanding of scripture.

1. *What does one consider the canon to be?* What are these writings we call scripture? Some fundamentalists, like Harold Lindsell, or Jewish Orthodox thinkers like Immanuel Jacobovitz "insist that the words of the Bible [or the Torah] are simply identical with the words of God."³² On the other hand, some say that the Bible's origin is mostly, if not entirely, human, but that it nonetheless contains guiding principles for life. Verhey notes that there is a growing consensus within the Christian community that affirms a middle way. There should be a "Chalcedonian" blend—acknowledging "the union of the divine word and the human words in scripture without identifying, confusing, separating, or dividing them."³³

If by using the word "Chalcedonian," Verhey means that there is an "ontological synthesis" of the human and divine in the essence of scripture, then Yoder would not stand on the middle ground of that growing consensus. For Yoder there are divine aspects of scripture—it tells

³¹Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," 28-39.

³²Ibid., 30, referring to Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Zondervan, 1976), and Immanuel Jacobovitz, "Response," in *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, compiled by the editors of *Commentary* magazine, (Macmillan, 1966), 109-116.

³³Verhey, "Use of Scripture," 30.

of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and he was divine, the Holy Spirit is revealing God's will to humans through scripture, and that is divine activity. But the scriptures themselves are not divine in nature. Nowhere does Yoder identify scripture as the words of God, except in the sense that God's word is revealed through the voices and writings of faithful communities. Given this down-playing of the divine dimension of scripture, several questions must be asked of Yoder: What makes the scriptures unique and authoritative? What is the reason for closing the canon? Why does the canon not remain "open," and fill with other sources that testify to that "foundational event," the story of Jesus? To agree with Yoder, there is a significant human dimension in the literature we call our canon. But to differ with him, there must be some meaning to the notion of the biblical writers being "inspired" to write what they did.

2. *What questions do we ask of scripture?* Our questions influence our answers. This is especially true for Christians seeking moral and ethical answers from scripture. Verhey suggests that our questions can be analyzed by considering level and type. "Any self-conscious recommendation for the use of scripture in ethics will have to judge both the *level* of moral discourse at which appropriate inquiry is made and the *type* of question which may be appropriately asked."³⁴

a) Levels of Moral Discourse. There are at least three levels of moral discourse at which one can approach scripture: moral, ethical, and post-ethical. At the *moral* level the primary question is, What ought I to do? ³⁵

³⁴Ibid., 30.

³⁵According to Verhey, individuals who make their inquiries at this level are Lindsell, with his biblicism; Brevard Childs, who "describes a

Seeking direct guidance from particular texts at this level, the theologian often regards the letter of the law over the spirit of the law. Questions at the *ethical* level ask, How shall I decide what moral rules are right? People who approach scripture at this level of moral discourse are seeking out guiding principles or themes (e.g. justice, love, repentance). These principles are then used to formulate specific responses to contemporary situations. Moral discourse also happens at a *post-ethical* level. This is the case if the assumption is that scripture cannot give any specific ethical guidance, but instead, for example, teaches us about God (H.R. Niebuhr³⁶), or encourages a deeper self-understanding and radical obedience (Rudolf Bultmann³⁷).³⁸

Yoder's discourse with scripture is primarily at the moral level and secondarily at the ethical level. To illustrate this, consider Yoder's use of Matthew 18:18-19 where Jesus talks about "binding and loosing."

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it

reflective process for seeking biblical warrants at the decision-making level"; and Richard Mouw, who maintains, against some opposition, that Christians should be obedient to divine commands, *ibid.*, 31.

³⁶H.R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941).

³⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

³⁸In this group are, for example, Paul Ramsey, "The Biblical Norm of Righteousness," *Interpretation* 24,4 (1977): 419-429, and Robert Fitch, *Of Love and Suffering* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). See Verhey, "Use of Scripture," 31.

will be done for you by my Father in heaven.³⁹

Jesus instructs his followers on how to conduct their social affairs. Yoder equates this process of binding and loosing with what he calls "practical moral reasoning." This is when "people make particular choices which are illuminated by their general faith commitments, but which still need to be worked through by means of detailed here-and-now processes."⁴⁰ Jesus taught that the decisions made between individuals on earth are of profound importance. Yoder concludes from this passage that, "a transcendent moral ratification is claimed for the decisions made in the conversations of two or three or more," which is done, "in a context of forgiveness and in the juridical form of listening to several witnesses."⁴¹ By identifying binding and loosing as practical moral reasoning, Yoder takes the first step toward asking the questions of scripture at the moral level. His next step, however, is actually a leap. He will take what Jesus said to the disciples back in the first century and, with little modification, make it normative for disciples here in the present century: "Every element noted in the passage cited from Matthew 18 has something to say to the way we think today about decision-making in the context of faith."⁴² Working directly from this chapter in Matthew, Yoder outlines the process of handling conflict within the church. "The deliberative process begins

³⁹New Revised Standard Version. See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 26-28.

⁴⁰Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," *The Priestly Kingdom*, 17.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 27.

⁴²*Ibid.*

with only the two parties to the conflict being involved. The conflict is broadened only gradually, and only so far as is needed to achieve reconciliation."⁴³ Yoder, in this case, is clearly approaching the text at what Verhey calls the moral level. His question is, How ought we to resolve conflict? The answer is a moral imperative (not an ethical principle, nor a personal attitude) taken directly from the pages of scripture.

By approaching scripture at a moral level of questioning, Yoder commits himself to a certain ecclesiology. When one asks the questions, What shall the church look like and how ought it to function?, he must fashion his answer around the form and function of the church in the first and second century, as portrayed in the New Testament.⁴⁴ It follows from this that if the church at the time of Paul was a minority, counter-culture group, then today's church should be likewise. Elsewhere Yoder defends restitutionism, that is, he defends the notion that the church today should be a continuation in form and function of the early church.⁴⁵

Yoder also asks questions of scripture at the ethical level. Because Yoder is, as we all must be, selective with his Bible passages, he will have

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴ "It may be most helpful, then to suggest that Yoder's hermeneutical orientation seeks to be faithful to the 'biblical point of view' by interpreting the Bible in the fashion which he believes that the Bible itself demands: in the church and in light of the confession that Jesus is Lord.... The key implication of biblical realism is, for Yoder, that Christians adopt the world view of the Bible as their own" (Philip LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology in John Howard Yoder's Critique of Constantinianism* [New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992], 52).

⁴⁵"Pointedly said: only the mental structure of restitutionism can be at once Christian and serious about history" (Yoder, "Anabaptism and History," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 130).

some guiding principles which inform his process of selection. When asking, How shall I decide which moral principles are right?, Yoder would answer, Those which keep us faithful to the meaning of Jesus. As mentioned above, Yoder admits to operating with a canon within the canon which guides his ethical decision-making process.⁴⁶

b) Types of Moral Discourse. Ethicists also ask different *types* of questions, two of these being duty and goal.⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, when asking "How shall we decide what is good?," focuses on the goal. He "moves from the eschatological teachings of Jesus to a statement of the kingdom of God as a social ideal."⁴⁸ Others answer the question by outlining one's duty and the biblical demand for righteousness and justice. Yoder does not quickly identify his theological ethics as being one or the other. For the most part, he combines both duty and goal. He approaches scripture with the intent to discover what the reign of God should look like in the community and strives for that goal. This is seen in his wanting to create a new community, which is the symbol and foretaste of what the world can be, and the goal to which it is heading. Inherent in this scheme is that members of the new community be duty-bound to the demands of

⁴⁶Yoder does not agree with a Bultmann-style post-ethical level of moral discourse. He says of Bultmann's radical obedience, "All that we need to know about particular decisions is the drive of love and the grace of freedom with which we enter the situation to discover then and there what it will mean, just then and there, to love the neighbor.... There is nothing 'radical' about the resulting behaviour, in the ordinary social meaning of that adjective" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 18-19).

⁴⁷Verhey, "Use of Scripture," 31.

⁴⁸Ibid., with reference to *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

discipleship and *agape*. He approaches scripture with the aim of describing the character of the Christian and the Christian community (for example, truth-telling and -living, mutual accountability, pacifism and non-violence) paying less attention to the outcome of such action (i.e., the goal), trusting that the resurrection of Jesus Christ will be victorious in the end. This hope is reflected in Yoder's closing words in *The Politics of Jesus*, "*Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur*. Our lamb has conquered; him let us follow."⁴⁹

A second type of question asked of scripture concerns the interplay of individual and political morality. Are the morals gleaned from scripture applied to individuals or communities? Furthermore, are they for ecclesial communities or for political communities? Yoder addresses both. With respect to individual morality, Yoder stresses the need for a person to make a commitment to a believing community, to participate in that community by exercising their unique gifts, and to be open to giving and receiving correction from the brothers and sisters within the community.⁵⁰ In a more significant way, however, Yoder interprets scripture in socio-political terms. This is seen both in the title and in the content of his book *The Politics of Jesus*. For example, Yoder interprets the statement by Jesus in Luke 4:14ff, "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..." as follows:

We may have great difficulty in knowing in what sense this event came to pass... but what the event was supposed to be is clear: it is a

⁴⁹Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 250.

⁵⁰Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, Ill. Brethren Press, 1987).

visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit.⁵¹

Verhey compares the types of questions Yoder asks with those of Jürgen Moltmann.

Yoder inquires of the New Testament for a "particular social-political-ethical option" (1972, 23); Moltmann insists that the appropriate question—the "question of theodicy, the question of suffering in expectation of God's just world"—today takes a political and social form (1968, 100). (It may be observed that, although Yoder and Moltmann agree that the political question is appropriate, they ask it at different *level* of moral discourse.)⁵²

Yoder and Moltmann both approach scripture with the same type (i.e. political) of question. However, Yoder does this at the moral level and Moltmann does it more at the ethical level.

3. *What do we understand when we understand scripture?* That is, what does the theologian or ethicist consider to be the message of the whole of scripture? Most have a summary phrase or working concept of the scriptures, a hallmark to which they refer when striving for biblical consistency. Most of these judgments are christological in some form or other. Some examples are as follows: a trans-historical understanding of Christ who transcends moral distinctions (Jacques Ellul), a tension between the trans-historical and historical character of Christ (World Council and Hendrik Kraemer), exodus and liberation (Gustavo Gutiérrez); violent and non-violent revolution, forensic atonement is the central message (Carl

⁵¹Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 45.

⁵²Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," 31. The Moltmann reference is to "Toward a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel," in his *Religion, Revolution and Hope* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 83-107.

F.H. Henry).⁵³

Every Christian ethicist or theologian has his or her own understanding of the main message of scripture. Yoder is quick to admit that he does operate with his own main message, or "canon within the canon."⁵⁴ With this admission it would seem that Yoder is allowing for a plurality of hermeneutical approaches, especially in light of his generous interpretation of the discrepancy between the different gospel accounts. In some respect he does accept this. He admits that there will be theologies that approach scripture with different emphases.⁵⁵ In other respects, however, Yoder is quite intolerant. He wants his own starting point to be the essential starting point for every Christian theology. That is, he seeks to make his canon within the canon (or his *a priori*) normative for all Christians. The Jesus of history is taken as the norm.⁵⁶ Authority comes

⁵³Ibid., 32-34.

⁵⁴See pp. 86-87 above. See also "The Biblical Mandate," 1ff., where he says one should be open about one's hermeneutical position, and that there are several which are "evangelical."

⁵⁵One example is the emphasis of liberation, see "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* 1 (September 1985): 55-74. Also the parallels he makes with an Anabaptist approach, "The Anabaptist Shape of Liberation," in *Why I Am a Mennonite: Essays On Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1988), 338-348.

⁵⁶Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 276.

from "reaching back" to Jesus.⁵⁷ "The truth which is in Jesus is the truth that matters the most, which must therefore regulate our reception and recognition of other kinds and levels of truth rather than being set in parallel or subordinated thereto."⁵⁸ This truth must have, like Jesus himself, an historical character.⁵⁹

We have seen earlier Yoder's moral community played a significant role in the development of his thought. That is, through his mentors in the Mennonite Church he gained an appreciation for Anabaptism and academic scholarship. Part of his personal struggle was to find a way to implement his own discovery of the Anabaptist Vision into a church he considered too hierarchical in its polity.⁶⁰ Both of these factors, i.e. his personal struggle and his moral community, led him to take a particular view of scripture. Like the Anabaptists centuries before, Yoder sought (and is still seeking) to emulate and restore the character of the early church. Hence, Yoder's hermeneutic is strong in its historical character (e.g., his

⁵⁷"Thus every new expression, including the trajectory of Christian reformulation in later redaction, is at the same time a new effort of the author to reach back to Jesus. That is why it is authoritative, not because it has evolved one step farther away from Jesus, but because it has reformulated the appeal to Jesus once more from a new, later perspective and thereby sharpened the claim that Jesus is authority even a decade or a generation later" (Yoder, "Authority of the Canon," 284).

⁵⁸Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," 117.

⁵⁹Verhey says about *The Politics of Jesus*, "The christological judgment here focuses on the historical Jesus as teacher and pattern; this Jesus is what one understands when one understands the New Testament. Movements in argument can be tested by their consistency with that understanding," "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," 32.

⁶⁰See ch. 2 above.

insistence on seeing the canon as a "reaching back"). To resolve the struggle, Yoder had to go back to scripture and develop a way in which to make his interpretation authoritative and command a hearing from his elders.⁶¹ In the process, he went back to scripture approaching it primarily at the moral level (according to Verhey's scheme). In doing so he attempted to "out-anabaptize" his fellow Anabaptists.

This close connection with scripture led to another significant result: his ecumenical concern. He had found the voice (i.e., a close reliance on scripture at a moral level) with which he could speak to his Mennonite colleagues.⁶² As he was strengthening this voice within the Mennonite arena, he was also able to channel it outward to other denominations.⁶³ By going back to the beginning of Christianity, so he thought, he could find *the* shape of the church, which would apply to all churches.

4. *What is the relevance of other sources for doing ethics?* The concern in this last question is the role of natural morality. "Some writers

⁶¹With this in mind it is significant to note that early in his career he wrote "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, the journal that carried the academic voice of the Mennonite Church. See *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41 (October, 1967): 291-308, reprinted in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 11-28.

⁶²An early example of this is seen in his introduction of an article he wrote with David A. Shenk in 1955, "There is no doubt that the intention of Mennonites is to guide both thought and life by the Bible. ... This central concern of Bible-centeredness must always be our starting point in thinking about the Christian faith and life. ... Yet it is becoming more and more clear that, in the interest of our concern for Biblicism, we must learn to state more clearly what we mean by that concept," "Biblicism and the Church," *Concern* 2 (1955): 26.

⁶³See, for example, the pamphlet, "The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church," (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1958).

issue a theological veto of natural morality, thus rendering other sources irrelevant to the recommendation and use of authorizations for moving from scripture to moral claims."⁶⁴ At the other extreme are others who assert that moral claims can be made on the basis of sources entirely independent of scripture. Most writers keep scripture and other sources for morality in dialogue with each other. The Bible, however should have the final word.⁶⁵ Such is the case for Yoder. The foundation of his ethical program is biblical morality.

To ask how the Bible functions in theology is like asking how the ground floor functions in a house... . In terms of traffic patterns, you can say that you have to go through the ground floor to get to the stairs which would lead to the other floors. In terms of architecture, you can say that it carries the weight of the upper stories. In terms of frequentation, you can say that the rooms there tend to be used by more people and to be more public. Any one of those answers is true, and any one of them is less than simply to say that the ground floor is the ground floor. ⁶⁶

Reason, as a source for theology and ethics, does not play a large role in Yoder's program. This is not to say that Yoder's method is not rational. For Yoder, reason is a tool and not a source for morality.⁶⁷ Laws of grammar and logic are employed in discussions with unbelievers, "with

⁶⁴Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," 34.

⁶⁵Ibid., 35.

⁶⁶Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," 103.

⁶⁷An example of this for individual ethics is *What Would You Do? A Serious Question to a Standard Question* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), and for the morality of war, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971; revised and expanded, 1992).

whom we do not share an ultimate court of appeal."⁶⁸ The problem with reason, however, is that it is "fallen" and therefore not a reliable source for theology.⁶⁹ The mistake of Roman Catholicism and Protestant Scholasticism is that it invests too much confidence in "general revelation," "natural insight," the "orders of creation," or any other standard which would set itself up as an infallible criterion.⁷⁰ The use of the "tongue" (using the word as it is found in James, which Yoder translates as "language") and playing with words in the attempt to be consistent "is a constant source of contestation and confusion."⁷¹ Language, says Yoder, is unruly and can have a distorting effect on the Bible. A further problem with basing theology too heavily upon a "specifically European (in fact, educated North European) pattern of rationality" is that it diminishes our ability to discourse with other cultures that have other styles of rationality (for example, fables, hero stories, proverbs and parables).⁷²

In the end Yoder gives the final word to the Bible. The believing

⁶⁸Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," 108.

⁶⁹See Yoder, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," *Transformation: An International Dialogue On Evangelical Social Ethics* 2 (January-March, 1985), 30. He criticizes the view that 'Jesus is the answer' for social ethics because it "assumes that we know what we ought to do, and that only the will is missing," when really, "the mind is also blurred and broken." See also idem, *The Politics of Jesus*, 19-21.

⁷⁰ "We should properly subordinate our methods. Rational scholastic orthodoxy errs in filtering the given texts through the grid of its independent ordering operation" (Yoder, "The Use of The Bible in Theology," 115). See also idem, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 40.

⁷¹Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," 109.

⁷²Yoder, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," 30.

community is to constantly rally around biblical concepts and seek to understand them. Present situations are "juxtaposed" to stories in the Bible. This is done by singing Psalms, reading the letters again, and retelling the stories and parables. "Then in the juxtaposition of those stories with our stories leaps the spark of the Spirit, illuminating parallels and contrasts, to give us the grace to see our age in God's light and God's truth in our words."⁷³

Conclusion. Yoder humanizes the scriptures. That is, his view is that they are the testimony of a community of ordinary people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Moreover, as this community set about the task of following Jesus's teachings, they developed a common memory of the Christ event. This memory was written down in what we now call the New Testament. The memory is necessarily selective, according to the situation of the community recalling the Jesus story. Hence there is variety and even disagreements within the various testimonies. The canon is the memory of a religious community, not a biography of Jesus. That same religious community lives today, and has the same tasks of remembering the Christ event and living in accordance with the norms established by the life and death of Jesus. This is Yoder's understanding of the hermeneutical task of the gathered community.

There are several strengths in this understanding. It encourages each Christian community to revisit the scriptures and to discern God's word together. It gives this community the power to decide for itself what the message is, and its ethical imperatives. Responsibility, and therefore

⁷³Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," 113.

dignity, is given to the local congregation of believers. Denominations have their official interpretations, but local congregations decide for themselves what is important. Yoder, with the use of the sociology of knowledge, incorporates this into the very fabric of his theology. As one congregation veers away from another on theological and ethical positions, he can call it faithfulness and orthodoxy, not infidelity or heresy. If one would extend this limited pluralism beyond the historical/narrative view of the canon, and if one would include the authority developed in other Christian communities within in this sociology of knowledge, then Yoder's concept of the church as it has been explored in this chapter shows promise for building bridges in an ecumenical environment.

Chapter 5

Theological and Ethical Implications of an Anabaptist Ecclesiology

The Believers' church, says Yoder, has never developed a positive identity of its own. Instead, it has defined itself in terms that contrast with the churches of the Reformation.¹ "It is true that we have piggybacked intellectually and institutionally on the 'Great Church' traditions we have criticized."² Yoder therefore has set for himself the task of constructing a positive identity of the Believers' church.³ He has sought to transform Anabaptist theology from serving a *corrective* function to a *normative* one. "The future of the church of Jesus Christ on earth, East, West, and South is the future of a voluntarily confessing community of committed adults."⁴

¹For a definition of Believers' church see ch. 2, n. 1 above.

²Spoken at a Believers' church conference, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, ON: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1979), 10.

³Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1985), 20.

⁴Yoder, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," 3. He says here that Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Juan-Luis Segundo, Karl Barth have been moving in this direction.

Yoder presents an ecclesiology that applies to all Christians, denominations, and churches. He addresses many theological topics and shows how they reinforce his concept of the church as a "voluntarily confessing community of committed adults." We turn now to some of these theological topics, namely, incarnation, salvation, "the principalities and powers," and eschatology. We will note how each of these areas feeds into and supports Yoder's ecclesiology and comment on the corresponding ecumenical implications.

A. Theological Implications of an Anabaptist Ecclesiology

1. Incarnation

This concept is one of the most important in Yoder's theology. God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In this person, God disclosed the meaning of history, God inaugurated the new aeon, and God demonstrated that the truly victorious way is the way of suffering and the cross.

In at least five different ways the church is to be like Jesus Christ. A first way is in its particularity. Just as Jesus was a particular historical being, so must the church be a particular social body. Jesus was a visible manifestation of God. After Pentecost, the church became the incarnation of the Spirit of God on earth. Second, just as the mystery of God's intention was disclosed in the person of Jesus, so the ways and means of God are to be demonstrated by the local community of believers. The church is the vessel that carries the meaning of history. For example, Yoder says that

In speaking of the Church, we must say that the meaning of history and the significance of everything that happens in the world is, not the fate of Western culture, of civilization, of the

human community of justice, or of the World, but the formation and building of the Body of Christ.... The Christian pacifist believes that the Church is the meaning of history.⁵

The third way the church is to be like Jesus has to do with suffering. The church's manner of operation is counter to culture. The church is to incarnate the new way of the people of God. Jesus's way was the way of suffering and the cross. Just as the incarnated one chose the path of obedience until death, so the church is to take the hard road of obedience. Fourth, the message of salvation was first incarnated in the person of Jesus. It continues to be offered to the world through the church. Just as the church is to bear the meaning of history, it also is responsible, by its very presence, i.e., in a *de facto* manner, for the salvation of the world. The reason the world has not come to an end, says Yoder, is because God is giving the church more time to expand God's kingdom.

Why does God let history continue?... In most of the key places where we find a New Testament expression in answer to that question, it has to do with the gathering of the church.... But it is clear that the meaningfulness of the ongoing duration of history—why it does not stop—is that preaching through the church is what time is going on for. The preaching of the Gospel is why time does not stop.⁶

Fifth, like Jesus, the church is to concern itself with obedience first, and

⁵Yoder, "The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State," in *On Earth Peace*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1978), 139-140. See also *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11, and *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 64.

⁶Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, Ind.: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1981, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 3003 Benham Avenue, 46517), 178; *The Politics of Jesus*, 108.

effectiveness second, if at all.⁷ This means that the church cannot comply with all of the means that the state and others employ in order to meet just ends. For example, Yoder says, "The fulfillment of God's purposes in the world is not dependent on efforts of socially insightful and powerful Christians, seeking by the manipulation of the powers of history to make things come out right."⁸ Christians are not to worry if their faithful actions do not bring foreseeable results. They are only called to be faithful to the life of a disciple of Jesus. Members of the church are able to be obedient with the help of God as it is experienced in the local fellowship.⁹

Paul Ramsey in his book, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, is critical of this idea that the church is to imitate Christ in all areas:

We are told that the politics of Jesus should be our politics; his nonresistance of evil, our nonresisting love even of enemy-neighbors; his way of doing his Father's reconciliation, our reconciling spirit. The disciple is not greater than his master. This states that Jesus is THE pattern, THE example.

Yet on other views of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the foregoing does not follow. One thing, at least, we do not imitate in Jesus Christ, namely, the fact that he had no Jesus Christ to imitate. He had no saviour made flesh.... His incarnation, his life as the God-man among us, his suffering, his death, his resurrection were unique, never to be repeated. Certainly not by us.... We are neither co-Creators nor co-Saviours. Hence, as the Reformers knew, we are to follow him—from a distance. We are not to take up *his* cross, but *our*

⁷Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 240-250.

⁸Yoder, "The Church and State According to a Free Church Tradition," in *On Earth Peace*, 287.

⁹See Yoder, "The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State," 136. He indicates that members of the gathered community have special powers available to them: e.g., the power of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and miracles.

cross to follow him.¹⁰

An aspect of this criticism is valid. Christians believe there was only one person who was a God-man. His resurrection was unique for that reason. Yoder would grant Ramsey this. On the other hand, however, Christians can *participate* in the same divine power of resurrection as Jesus did. For this reason, Yoder argues, the church can really incarnate the Spirit of God. I understand this to be much like Tillich's concept of the New Being. He says people can participate in the power of the New Being in a manner similar to the way Jesus did. "Through participation in the New Being, which is the being of Jesus as the Christ, men also participate in the manifestation of the atoning act of God."¹¹ The key here is an understanding of atonement that focuses on participation, not substitution or satisfaction (which appears to be Ramsey's point of view). Yoder is similar to Tillich in this regard, except Yoder uses the word *appropriate* instead of *participate*:

[God's] triumph of communion-sacrifice-obedience-*agape* over man's rebellion at its worst now stands before man as an object of faith, (faith-union; not merely faith-assent). He can identify himself with that obedience which has swallowed up his rebellion in history. *Appropriation* of the [atoning] work of Christ is by repentance and faith.¹²

Humans are called to a life of obedience, sacrifice, and communion with

¹⁰Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, Pa.: The Pa. State Univ. Press, 1988), 113-114, as found in Philip LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology in John Howard Yoder's Critique of Constantinianism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 78-79.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 176.

¹²Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 230.

Christ. By doing so, the church can continue to counter the forces of evil in the world.

2. Communal Concept of Salvation

Yoder's concept of salvation is more communal than individualistic. To be sure, there is an individual dimension to salvation, for the strength of any community lies in the integrity of its individuals. Yoder however thinks that in this stage of Western intellectual history, a re-emphasis on the communal dimension is needed.¹³ Throughout Yoder's writings we find references to the "peoplehood," "new community," "new social wholeness," "priestly kingdom," and "royal priesthood."¹⁴

The understanding of salvation in Yoder's concept of the church is shifted. Yoder asserts that the gospel does not only transform individuals, it must transform communities. Furthermore, the actual transformation of the community does not happen by way of the individual. Rather, it happens in a communal or relational manner. As a person is changed by the grace of God through the love of Christ, barriers are broken down between that person and his or her neighbour.¹⁵ The result, at least in

¹³See Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," *The Priestly Kingdom*, 22ff. He talks about the swing of a pendulum in Western intellectual history "between the collective and the individual." He offers a third option where the individual participates in a collective (p.24).

¹⁴See for example, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," 258; and John H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, Kans.: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 17.

¹⁵Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, "Justification by Faith," 215-232. Especially note his interpretation of 2 Cor. 5:17. Commonly the verse is translated as "if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature." Yoder prefers to read it as, "if anyone is in Christ, new is creation" p.226-228. For this

theory, is the generation of a "new humanity" which is recognizably different from world.¹⁶

There are at least three reasons he gives for a communal understanding of salvation. First of all, it is a myth to think that we exist on our own, that we experience God only in isolation, and that we can act in a purely individual manner. We are social beings. It therefore stands to reason that a person cannot experience salvation without it having communal ramifications.¹⁷ For Yoder, the true test of salvation is not a

emphasis Yoder relies on the work of New Testament scholars such as Markus Barth ("Jews and Gentiles: the Social Character of Justification in Paul," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5,2 [Spring 1968]: 241ff).

¹⁶Yoder, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believer's Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, ON: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee, 1979), 13.

¹⁷Stanley Hauerwas, a pacifist Methodist in the United States, says he is indebted to Yoder for much of his thinking. In his introduction to his recent book Hauerwas comments on the communal nature of a Mennonite concept of salvation: "It is not accidental that I set out to say a bit about myself, but ended up talking about Yoder.... Thus, when I was asked to contribute to the *Christian Century* series 'How My Mind Has Changed,' I began with the story of the Mennonite in Shippshewana, Indiana, who was confronted with the question, 'Brother are you saved?' Nothing in all his years as a Mennonite had prepared him to answer a question so posed. After a long pause, he asked for a pencil and paper, wrote a list of names on it, and handed it back to his interrogator. He explained that the list was made up of names of people, most of whom he thought to be his friends and some who might be less than friendly toward him. But he suggested that the evangelical go ask them whether they thought him saved or not, since he certainly would not presume to answer the question on his own behalf.

"I do not know if this story is true or not, but it exemplifies my growing sense of who I am—that is, I am best-known through my firends. This... denotes my increasing theological, epistemological, and moral conviction that theology is done in service to the church and accordingly

(Note continued on next page.)

convincing story of a wonderful faith experience, but rather it is how that person treats his or her neighbour. More important than correct doctrine, or correct words, is correct behaviour. If you are saved, you will act like you are saved. Those actions will be evident in your behaviour in the community. But believers can only live out the standards of discipleship with the support of an intentional community.

A second reason that salvation is communal has to do with Yoder's way of interpreting the event of Jesus Christ in primarily socio-historical terms. Yoder understands that the gospel breaks down the barriers between people:

The message is not about social action, not even about social ethics or ethics at all: it is about the meaning of the death of Christ, which was to "make peace" between two categories of humanity.¹⁸

Here Yoder is talking about how in the days of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles represented "two categorically opposed ways to be human." "They are so different that they can be spoken of as having a wall between them."¹⁹ This is where the work of Christ comes in. "It is the cross itself which destroyed the wall."²⁰

A third reason is ecclesiological. We have already seen that Yoder's

cannot be the product of the individual mind" (Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994], 24-25.

¹⁸Yoder, "The Social Shape of the Gospel," in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 282.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 282.

²⁰*Ibid.*

concept of the church requires that the church be a visible group, and that invisibility was a falsehood introduced after the "fall" of the church since Constantine.²¹ "The kingdom of God is a social order and not a hidden one."²² The very nature of the church for Yoder is communal.

3. Principalities and Powers

A group of New Testament texts have been largely neglected in modern times. These have to do with the "principalities and powers."²³ Yoder highlights them for the sake of showing their cosmology and how it influences his own:

The handful of texts in the Pauline corpus which refer to "principalities and powers, thrones, angels..." represent in the minds of the Apostle and his disciples a coherent segment of a larger coherent cosmology. The work of Christ has an impact upon that cosmos.

Christian interpretation since medieval times has assumed that this was repeating something about "angels" which we already knew and had therefore paid little further attention to those texts. Scholastic Protestantism gave them still less attention. Liberal Protestantism consciously excised them from its practical canon, knowing that they describe something which we already know cannot be; namely a world of familiar spirits behind the causation of events.

As a result, a major segment of Paul's understanding of

²¹See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 135ff.

²²Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 108.

²³For work on this topic Yoder relies heavily on Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, Pa., Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1962; 2nd ed., 1977) which he himself translated from the Dutch. Yoder says in the epilogue of the second edition, "My own summary [of the Powers theme in Scripture] in *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972), [is] little more than an expansion of Berkhof's analysis," 70.

the universe and of redemption has been made inoperative.²⁴ Because Yoder identifies the church as a separate socio-political body, he has to redefine or re-frame what is commonly thought of as the "political arena."²⁵ As we have seen earlier, Yoder makes a clear distinction between the church and the world, and that he identifies the church with the reign of God and the world does not submit to the reign of God.

The apostolic church confessed Jesus Christ as Lord; risen, ascended, sitting at the right hand of the Father, i.e., ruling (1 Cor. 15:25ff.) over the not yet subdued *kosmos*. The principalities and powers, though not manifestly confessing His Lordship, could not escape from His hidden control or from the promise of His ultimate victory. In ways that took account of their rebelliousness He denied them free rein, using even their self-glorifying designs within His purpose. A later term for this same ideas was "Providence."²⁶

He explains the fundamental difference between the two realms using the concepts of fallenness, sin, evil, the "principalities and powers" (using the language of Paul), and the state.

He starts his train of thought with the premise that humans are fallen.

²⁴Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 112.

In this passage we see Yoder using a method which for him is typical. At salient points in the development of his theology, he compares his view with other views (e.g., "Scholastic Protestantism," and "Liberal Protestantism"). Earlier we saw him use this method with the topic of the canon. Elsewhere he uses it on the topic of Christianity and society (in "The Classic Options Graphically Portrayed" in *Christian Witness to the State*, 60-73). With the employment of this type of method, we can clearly see that Yoder's task is to present his case not only to the other churches, but over against them as well.

²⁵Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 110-113.

²⁶Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 136.

Nowhere does he ever explain in detail what he means by this. He *does* say that because human nature is fallen, it is unreliable as a moral guide, which is the root of his argument against natural law as a guide for Christian ethics. In an article entitled, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," he criticizes the view that 'Jesus is the answer' for social ethics because it "assumes that we know what we ought to do, and that only the will is missing," when really, "the mind is also blurred and broken."²⁷

A consequence of fallenness is sin. Sin is when humans violate God's will and do harm to one another and creation. Except for some vague references to humans being fallen (e.g., the mind is "blurred and broken"), sin is understood exclusively in ethical terms. In Yoder's theology, sin is more an *act* than a *condition*. As humans sin, they create self-serving and self-preserving structures.²⁸ Evil is the manifestation of sin present in the unjust "powers" or "structures" that govern this world. The powers are seen as social structures (religious, intellectual, and political) which, because they are fallen, tend to pull people away from God, claiming absolute status for themselves. These powers are not inherently bad—they simply serve an ordering function in the world, like a librarian orders books in the library.²⁹ "God is not said to *create* or *institute* or *ordain* the

²⁷Yoder, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," *Transformation: An International Dialogue On Evangelical Social Ethics* 2 (January-March, 1985): 30.

²⁸"There has been hierarchy and authority and power since human society existed. Its exercise has involved domination, disrespect for human dignity, and real or potential violence ever since sin has existed" (Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 203).

²⁹"Nor is it that in his ordering of it he specifically, morally approves

powers that be, but only to *order* them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place."³⁰ But they do have a character, and that character has soured.

These powers have rebelled and are fallen. They did not accept the modesty that would have permitted them to remain conformed to the creative purpose, but rather they claimed for themselves an absolute value. They thereby enslave man and his history.... To what is man subject? Precisely to those values and structures which are necessary to life and society, but which have claimed the statues of idols and have succeeded in making men serve them as if they were of absolute value.³¹

The difference between the church and the world is that the world is swayed by unjust and idolatrous claims of the principalities and powers which are manifest in structures and institutions. The church on the other hand experiences, through Christ, victory over the powers and offers this to others in the world.³² This is not to say that the "lordship of Christ" is only operative in the realm of the church. Christ is lord over both, except only the latter recognizes Christ as head. What the work of Christ did was break the sovereignty of the Powers. "This is what Jesus did, concretely and

of what government does. The sergeant does not produce the soldiers he drills, the librarian does not create nor approve of the book he catalogs and shelves. Likewise God does not take the responsibility for the existence of the rebellious 'powers that be' or for their shape or identity; they already are. What the text says is that he orders them, brings them into line, that by his permissive government he lines them up with his purpose" (ibid.).

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 144. See his chapter, "Christ and Power," 135-162, especially 143ff.

³²Ibid., 162.

historically, by living among men a genuinely free and human existence."³³ Jesus "existed in their midst so morally independent of their pretensions. He did not fear even death. Therefore his cross is a victory, is the confirmation that he was free from the rebellious pretensions of the creaturely condition."³⁴

The function of the state, with the use of its "sword" for persuasion, is one of preservation or conservation. The state is not so much any political pattern but understood more as, in Yoder's words, the "fundamental phenomenon that society is organized by the appeal to force as ultimate authority."³⁵ The function of the church, with its adherence to the law of *agape*, is one of redemption.³⁶

In spite of the present visible dominion of the "powers" of "this present evil age," the triumph of Christ has already guaranteed that the ultimate meaning of history will not be found in the course of earthly empires or the development of proud cultures, but in the calling together of the "chosen race, royal

³³Ibid., 147.

³⁴Ibid., 148.

³⁵Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 12. According to Hans J. Hillerbrand in "The Anabaptist view of the State" (*Mennonite Quarterly Review* 32,2 [April 1958]: 83-110), Yoder's understanding of the *nature* of the state is like the sixteenth-century Anabaptists: "The state is ordained by God. ... [Here there is] a profound understanding of the mystery that God's creation rises against the creator, but can only do so with such power as God has given" (p. 86).

In linking the state with the Fall, Yoder is also in essential agreement on the *origin* of the state: "According to Anabaptist thinking the origin of the state is directly related to the flood and thereby to human sin. The state is God's answer to human sin. It is an indication of God's punishment and shows his wrath" (ibid., 85-86).

³⁶Yoder, "The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State," 141.

priesthood, holy nation," which is the church of Christ. The church is not fundamentally a source of moral stimulus to encourage the development of a better society—though a faithful church should also have this effect—*it is for the sake of the church's own work that society continues to function*. The meaning of history—and therefore the significance of the state—lies in the creation and the work of the church.³⁷

The church, according to Yoder, has the task of witnessing to the world, and calling people to join the "holy nation."

Yoder's message to the other churches in the ecumenical arena is that those in the mainline should change (e.g., their polity, world view) and join the Believers' churches. In Yoder's eyes, most denominations have compromised on the ethic of love and have chosen the false road of trying to direct history, e.g., involvement in war, involvement in politics which requires going against one's conscience. Yoder's message is that the course of history is in God's hands and that the role of the church is not to direct it but to role-model an ideal society. Even though this option has the appearance of avoiding responsibility in the world, Yoder adamantly insists that it does not.

It is thus a fundamental error to conceive of the position of the church in the New Testament in the face of social issues as a "withdrawal".... What can be called the "otherness of the church" is an attitude rooted in her strength and not in her weakness. It consists in her being a herald of liberation and not a community of slaves.... The church accepted as a gift the fact that she was a "new humanity" created by the cross and not by

³⁷Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 13 (italics added). "To use the example of Colossians, the powers are not merely defeated in their claim to sovereignty, and humbled; they are also reenlisted in the original creative purpose of the service of humanity and the praise of God" (Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 61).

the sword.³⁸

Yoder believes that the ultimate victory over the powers has been won in the triumph of the lamb at the cross.³⁹

4. Eschatology

In chapter one we saw that Yoder operates with an "already but not yet" type of eschatology. What needs to be added at this point is how this eschatology affects his concept of the church. The church is both an "aftertaste" and "foretaste" of God's reign. The church lives in the time in which the old and the new aeon overlap.⁴⁰ It is both a reminder of God's activity in the past, and a messenger of what is to come in the future:

This new body, the church, as aftertaste of God's loving triumph on the cross and foretaste of His ultimate loving triumph in His kingdom, has a task within history. History is the framework in which the church evangelizes, so that the true meaning of history is the fact that God has chosen to use it for such a "scaffolding" service.⁴¹

The ethical consequences for the church are dramatic. "The new aeon involves a radical break with the old; Christ also was forced to break with the Jewish national community to be faithful to his mission. The gospel He brought... proclaimed the institution of a new kind of life, not of a new government."⁴² First of all, this eschatology requires of the church that its

³⁸Ibid., 151-152.

³⁹Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 242.

⁴⁰Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 58.

⁴¹Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 10-11.

⁴²Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 58-59.

members strive to meet exacting moral standards, because, after all, they are the carriers of the kingdom of God on earth. Second, such an eschatology allows the believers to put an emphasis on faithfulness over effectiveness because of their forward-looking disposition. That is, the church is meant to live out in the present what the kingdom of God will be like in the future. Just as Christ refused to compromise on his aim of loving everyone (e.g. he rejected the Zealot option⁴³), so the church is to be obedient to that same aim.

Finally, such an eschatology allows Yoder to criticize all other churches who do not share his concept of the church as a persecuted minority of adult believers. He links this critique of other churches with "the fall" of the church, which is symbolized for him in the emperor Constantine.⁴⁴ One of the greatest errors of the "majority churches" since Constantine is where they located God's reign. They do not, as does Yoder, see the reign of God as being proleptically present in the church. Instead, the reign of God is identified with the *status quo*. Many things accompany such a shift: the church must adjust its ethical aims from faithfulness to effectiveness, it must justify "bearing the sword" in the constraint of evil-doers, it must lower the standard of morality for the average Christian, and it effectively erases the distinction between the church and the world.⁴⁵

⁴³Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 57.

⁴⁴LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology*.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 201ff.

B. Ethical Implications of an Anabaptist Ecclesiology

Yoder's theology emphasizes that the body of believers is a visible form of the presence of God within history. Such an assertion yields serious ethical consequences. The manner in which the church conducts itself is virtually more important than the church's beliefs and principles.⁴⁶

The remainder of this chapter will consider three dimensions in which Christian ethics can operate: personal, communal, and the church's relation to the state. In the next chapter we will consider a fourth realm—the ways in which Yoder sees the churches interacting with each other. These considerations are explored in order to illustrate the ethical implications of Yoder's Anabaptist ecclesiology.

1. The Personal Dimension to Ethics

Yoder challenges the individualistic focus of some ethicists. He disagrees that the church should focus its ethical instruction on the individual—on making Christians into better people—which then in turn creates a better society.

Obviously each individual must make his own decision about whether to respond in obedient faith to this message or to reject it. This, however, must not mean that a concern for individual responses may legitimately hide any of the original social

⁴⁶"Although Yoder feels that it is important to define apostasy and error clearly, he does not assume that the primary mode of apostasy is doctrinal. He specifically challenges on New Testament grounds the idea that doctrine is more essential than church order or ethics as a test of faith" (Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context," 150, who refers to Yoder, "The Contemporary Evangelical Revival and the Peace Churches," in *Mission and the Peace Witness*, ed. Robert Ramseyer [Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979], 101).

dimensions of the gospel proclamation.⁴⁷

He says in "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," that,

All the warmth, devotion and readiness to sacrifice that can be produced in the heart of a believer does not convey enough information about what the will of God is in a particular circumstance.⁴⁸

His argument here is that even though an individual has a "changed heart," he or she still has no way of knowing how to behave as a Christian.⁴⁹ Two options for the individual are reason and pragmatism. But both of these lead to error, according to Yoder. In the former case, human reason is unreliable because it, just like the believer, is fallen, and quickly becomes an instrument "of our justification rather than our

⁴⁷Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 23. Also see, "The Experiential Etiology of Evangelical Dualism," *Missiology: An International Review* 11 (October 1983): 449-459.

⁴⁸Yoder, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," *Transformation: An International Dialogue On Evangelical Social Ethics* 2 (January-March 1985): 28.

⁴⁹Yoder claims that his social/communal emphasis is broadly founded: "The priority of the individual as the place from which meaning, being, and doing springs, is so overwhelmingly assumed in western culture that most North American evangelicals do not understand what is meant when cultural anthropology or hebraic realism speak of personhood or peoplehood primarily as historical, social categories. This assumption cannot be required in the rest of the world where the social and cultural presuppositions of individualism have never dominated in the same way. Thus to focus social ethics on the experience of new birth, or sanctification in the inwardmost heart of the individual, to settle all other ethical questions, is therefore dubious not only because it is empty of substantive ethical content. It is also deceptive in so far as it mistakenly ascribes an ontological reality to the 'new creature', in Paul's phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:17" (ibid., 30).

servanthood."⁵⁰ In the latter case, to calculate what to do from the basis of what will work is operating from a false assumption. That is, it assumes an establishment position of the church, where one does what is politically expedient.⁵¹

The individual instead is to turn to the community of committed believers. In this context, the community seeks to discern the word of God by reading scripture, giving consideration to the modern context, allowing the Holy Spirit to illumine their hearts, and by reaching consensus on issues and decisions.⁵²

In spite of his emphasis on the communal dimension, Yoder, of course has some ethical expectations for the individual. First of all, the individual must make the decision to be part of a local fellowship of believers. This can be gradual or sudden, but the commitment must be overt. In addition, individuals are expected to submit themselves to the admonishment of members within the group. They shall also be willing to hold the same members accountable for their faith. Also, the individual is obligated to contribute of their gifts to the local church congregation.

Finally, the individual is expected to behave differently than the "rest of the society." That is, the Christian is to practice an ethic of non-resistant

⁵⁰Ibid., 29.

⁵¹"When you ask about the sanctity of life, or about the teachings of Jesus about loving one's enemy, you will discover that these are subordinated to the pragmatic need to defend a particular kind of political order, which because it can be demonstrated to be pragmatically more favourable to the freedoms of the churches (or to other human freedoms) is deemed better than the others" (ibid.).

⁵²See ch. 4 above, and Yoder's "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" for a detailed description of how the body discerns the word of God.

love, both at home and at work, both in private life and in public life. For example, the individual is expected not to return violence with violence when personally confronted, nor participate in war or the machinery of war.

2. The Communal Dimension to Ethics

In contrast to North American evangelical ethics which focus on the individual, Yoder brings his ethics to bear on the collective. "We need an explicit approach to the social dimension of the life of faith."⁵³ This communal dimension has three primary aspects: communal knowledge (or epistemology), polity, and discipline.

First, the epistemological function of a church community is central for Yoder. He spends a great deal of energy explaining how the community comes to know a different reality (see chapter four above). It is this function which creates and sustains the alternate vision for the world. Yoder maintains that the only way of knowing God's will for the people is through the context of discernment by a group of individuals sharing the same belief in the God of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Yoder's ecclesiology is

⁵³Yoder, "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics," 31.

sectarian—it is an epistemological sectarianism.⁵⁴

In his article "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective," Yoder refers to what he calls a "communal hermeneutic."

Yoder's description is based on the New Testament, where

this community is described... as a body needing to have each member do a different thing. The Apostle Paul says that *every* member of the body has a distinctive place in this process.⁵⁵

The community will have individuals performing the following functions: "agents of direction," who offer prophecy, vision and charisma; "agents of memory," who act as "scribes" and help remember lessons from the past; "agents of linguistic self-consciousness," who act as teachers (*didaskalos*), and "agents of order and due process," who act as a moderating team to ensure that the process is wholesome and that the "conclusions reached are genuinely consensual."⁵⁶ This consensus is crucial, since it is held that the Spirit of God will reveal itself in such a way that it will find agreement within everyone present. Hence, Yoder has a theological rationale for his sociologically founded communal hermeneutic.

⁵⁴Harry Huebner makes a distinction between sociological sectarianism and epistemological sectarianism: the former "means withdrawal from mainstream society," and the latter "means community dependence" (Harry Huebner, "Theology and Moral Agency: The Role of God and Church in Contemporary Christian Ethics," TM [photocopy], available from the author at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2ff.). For this distinction Huebner refers to Stanley Hauerwas in his article, "Will the Real Sectarian Stand Up?" (*Theology Today* 44 [April 1987]: 87).

⁵⁵Yoder, "Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," 29.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 28-34. See also LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology*, 69-71.

Second, Yoder has an explicit view on how the church community should govern itself. In his book, *The Fullness of Christ*, Yoder deals with the topic of church leadership in detail.⁵⁷ He essentially argues that the present predominant form of church ministry is all wrong. The mono-pastoral, jack-of-all-trades approach to ministry cannot be endorsed by the New Testament. Instead, each member in the Christian community is to use their charismatic gifts for the edification of the group. He does not see a clergy/laity distinction in the New Testament. Everyone in the church is a minister of one sort or another and therefore ministry is universal. Rather than looking at Jesus' example of leadership, Yoder looks at the early church's example of ministry. The vocabulary of the New Testament points to many different ministries: evangelism, shepherding, miracles, healing, tongues, knowledge, and apostleship.⁵⁸ For Yoder, the "most striking general trait is what we may call the *multiplicity* of the ministry."⁵⁹ He sees a threefold multiplicity: first, the ministries are diverse (there are many different functions); second, the ministries are plural. That is, for some roles, several members carry out the same office. The ministry is universal. That is, everyone has a gift and is expected to use

⁵⁷Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987). This book was first published as *Concern* pamphlet #17 (Scottsdale, PA: 1969). It is a result of Yoder's conversation with literature produced at that time. He offers no apology for this re-publishing because, as he immodestly puts it, "The quantity, the thoroughness, and the originality of that conversation have not been equaled since the early 1970s."

⁵⁸See the chart in *The Fullness of Christ*, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

it.⁶⁰ According to Yoder, in the New Testament (especially in Hebrews) we have an abolition of the priesthood. We see that "priesthood" is to be "the character of the entire people of God, not of any single priestly person in the church."⁶¹

The third communal dimension to Yoder's ecclesiology relates to the issue of church discipline. Yoder's prescription for such a case is neither a vague "whatever-is-right-for-you" approach, nor a cold-hearted legalism. As he explains the contemporary application of a text in Matthew 18, he says

We have here an alternative both to individualistic intuitionism and to completely objective rigidity, in the form of a prescription for a valid, reconciling, decision-making process. That there will be rules, that these will sometimes collide and sometimes need to bend is neither affirmed nor denied, but rather located within a more important question: namely, "How are you going to go about it?" If you go about it in an open context, where both parties are free to speak, where additional witnesses provide objectivity and mediation, where reconciliation is the intention and the expected outcome is a judgment that God himself can stand behind, then the rest of the practical moral reasoning process will find its way.⁶²

The community is engaged in the process of resolving disputes between members. Objective witnesses and mediators are required to help guide the process along. Yoder does not advocate this process only because it is effective. He offers this "reconciling process" as the biblical model, one which "God himself can stand behind."

⁶⁰This then explains the subtitle of the book: *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry*.

⁶¹Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ*, 16.

⁶²Yoder, "Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," *The Priestly Kingdom*, 27-28.

3. Witness to the State

Yoder, as we have seen, advocates the creation of an alternate community, with its own Christian identity, its own outlook on the world (e.g., from the standpoint of the future consummation of history), and its own morality and means of enforcing it. Such a community will then be, by its very existence as a social group within society, a concrete witness to God's presence in the world. The community role-models to non-Christian society how life should be and invites outsiders to join in.

The specific witness that the church makes to the state takes several forms.⁶³ Part of the church's witness to the state comes directly from the challenge presented by its existence as a group in society with alternate values and behaviors. There are times, however, when it is appropriate for the church to do more than this—when the church should interact directly and explicitly with the government with intentions of calling the state to exercise a greater degree of justice. Three conditions are to be met, however, before the church has a right to witness to the state.⁶⁴ First, the church's witness should be truly representative of the church and not just

⁶³Yoder's "Christian witness to the state" has been well documented by Joel Zimbelman, "Yoder: Political Ethics," chapter 6 in "Theological Ethics and Politics in the Thought of Juan Louis Segundo and John Howard Yoder" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1986), 253-322; and LeMasters, "Practical Application: Yoder's Alternative View of Christian Involvement in Secular Society," *The Import of Eschatology*, 143-198.

⁶⁴At this point I am referring to the church as a corporate body, not the witness it makes through its individuals that have contact with the government.

a small group or outspoken individuals.⁶⁵ Second, "the witness of the church must be consistent with her own behaviour. Only if the church herself is demonstrably and ethically working on a given problem does the church have a right to speak to others."⁶⁶ Third, "the church should speak only when she has something to say." For example, "Only a church doing something about prisoner rehabilitation would have any moral right to speak--or have any good ideas--about prison conditions or parole regulations."⁶⁷

Once it is deemed that the church does have the right to speak, its message can be positive or negative. The "positive prophetic task" of the church includes serving the society as a model community, acting as a reference group, and a providing a pastoral and prophetic resource to the society.⁶⁸ The "negative prophetic tasks" include "standing in critical judgment of the actions and motives of society," calling the state to fulfill its obligations as the state.

Yoder's working assumption is that there are two different ethics at work, one for the church and one for society:

We need to distinguish between the *ethics of discipleship* which are laid upon every Christian believer, by virtue of his very confession of faith, and an *ethic of justice* within the limits of relative prudence and self-preservation, which is all one can

⁶⁵Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 21.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., 21-22. It is helpful to note here that by grounding the church's witness in its own experience, Yoder is distinguishing himself from the "traditional 'lobbying' efforts of church and interchurch agencies," p. 21.

⁶⁸Zimbelman, "Theological Ethics and Politics," 293-294.

ask of the larger society.⁶⁹

The state has a "conservative" role, and the church, by way of its example and outreach as the body of Christ, has a redemptive role.⁷⁰ If there is a change over time in Yoder's theology, it would be seen here on the issue of an ethical dualism. Apparently there are two standards, one for the state and one for the church.⁷¹ Later, Yoder clarifies this and says that there are no guidelines for the state except those that have been set by the church, hence there is one ethic for all.⁷² The dualism enters in at the level of response--response to God. Christians who say "yes" to God are able to fulfill the ethics of the new age. Others who say "no" to God abide by some less demanding ethics.⁷³ One primary mode of the church's witness to the

⁶⁹Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 23 (italics mine). "The Christian, who has spiritual resources for unselfish and rational action, cannot expect of societies, which have no such resources and make no claim to be fully disinterested, a Christian degree of unselfishness and love. This is the drawback in any attempt to derive a social and political strategy from individual Christian ethics, and although Niebuhr formulates this observation differently in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, his thesis has a degree of validity" (Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Heerewegen Pamphlet Number One [Zeist, The Netherlands: 1954], 15-16).

⁷⁰"It is because the State is keeping things peaceable that the Church has the chance to bring men to the knowledge of truth. There is always this distinction between these two areas, or orders, and the duality is defined in that one is redemptive and the other conservative" (Yoder, "The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State," in *On Earth Peace*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh [Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1978], 141).

⁷¹"The doctrine of regeneration means that ethics for Christians and for unregenerate society are two distinct disciplines" (Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 21).

⁷²"The Anabaptists described this as 'duality without dualism'" (Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 31).

⁷³"God has a positive word of salvation and call to salvation which He addresses to both the Church and the World" (Yoder, "Theological Basis of

state is through "middle axioms." These are concepts which "translate into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue.... They mediate between the norms of faith and the situation conditioned by unbelief."⁷⁴ The church is to present to the society a paradigm of a new community,⁷⁵ it is to act as leaven, yeast, and as a conscience for society.⁷⁶ The task of the church to represent a model community is not an irrelevant one as some would assume. Yoder does not tolerate the patronizing appreciation of the so-called "Christian realists" who commend the Mennonites for their moral purity and pacifism, and at the same time say that their position necessarily involves withdrawal and irresponsibility.⁷⁷

In an age in which the escalation of violence has gone beyond anything Hubmaier could have imagined or taken

the Christian Witness," 136-137). Also see Yoder's proposal for some "middle axioms" which the church can communicate to social leaders (Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 35-44).

⁷⁴Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 32. See also p. 33, n. 3. Yoder gives nine examples of middle axioms. Some are as follows: limit the use of force to the police function; keep the state from its overdoing the police function and claiming to bring in an ideal order; encourage the state to take "not the *lesser* but the [alternative which is the] *least* evil"; speak out when the state suggests the sacrifice of such positive human values as "honesty, and mutual respect, hard work and clean thinking, unselfishness and tolerance" for the sake of future institutional benefits; "we do not ask of the government that it be nonresistant; we do, however, as that it take the most just and the least violent action possible" (ibid., 35-44).

⁷⁵Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Theology Today* 48/1 (April 1991): 44.

⁷⁶Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 158.

⁷⁷Cf. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 36.

responsibility for, and in which room for citizen involvement has opened worlds which did not exist for Sattler, it is most illegitimate to let our thinking on social ethics continue to be constrained within the straight-jacket of the axiomatic either/or decision between "involvement" and "withdrawal." Today, commitment to peace-making and civil involvement belong together rather than being alternatives.⁷⁸

Christians can witness to the state by direct involvement with the government. Yoder's thought encourages activity in the world, not passivity. However, the temptation to exalt effectiveness over faithfulness must be resisted, as, for example, Christ resisted the Zealot option.

On the topic of effectiveness, it is interesting to note that in 1959 Yoder said that "leavening works better than policing... the prophetic function of the church, properly interpreted, is more effective against injustice than getting into the political machinery oneself."⁷⁹ Nine years later, he sounds like a timid Calvinist: "If through their numbers, their reputation, or their spiritual gifts Christians are able to change the course of history, let them do so; but this is much less often the case than they think."⁸⁰ In 1985, in the context of Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue, he says that there is nothing stopping a Christian from running for office, but that there is so much keeping that person from getting elected (for example, the stance on "truth telling, slavery, abortion...") that this question is not relevant."⁸¹ In spite of

⁷⁸Yoder, "The Believer's Church: Global Perspectives," 14.

⁷⁹Yoder, "Peace Without Eschatology?" 22.

⁸⁰Yoder, "Church and State According to a Free Church Tradition," 287.

⁸¹Yoder, "Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology," *TSF Bulletin* (May-June 1985): 6.

the change in context or tone, it appears that on this point Yoder has been consistent over time.

Yoder's concept of the church as a community of believers acts a shaping force behind both his theology and his ethics. The church, as a body of people who believe that Jesus was the Christ, in effect becomes the incarnation of Jesus in the world today. Salvation comes to these people and the world around them as barriers between and around them are broken down. These barriers can be broken down by Jesus's disciples because of what happened at the cross. Yoder says that Jesus's death and resurrection (the Lamb that was slain) has in principle conquered the structures responsible for the evil in the world—the principalities and powers. The body of believers are to incarnate this victorious life in the transition time before the new age is to come. The primary responsibility of an individual in this church is two-fold: decide to follow Jesus's teachings, and commit the whole self to the community of believers. This new community models a life for the non-believing world and invites them to join.

How does Yoder take this communal concept of the church and interact with other ecclesiologies? It is to this question that we now turn in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 6

Ecumenical Concerns, Criticisms and Conclusions

In this chapter we direct our attention to Yoder's ecumenical concern in particular. Every Christian theologian should be "ecumenically concerned." Yoder distinguishes between a narrow and a broad understanding of the term *ecumenical*.¹ In a narrow sense, it pertains to the actual agencies devoted to inter-denominational conversations, especially among groups within the World Council of Churches. In a broader sense of the term, *ecumenical* pertains to Christian efforts at overcoming the barriers between denominations.² Yoder uses the term in both the broad and the narrow senses, but most often he refers to the term in its broader sense. Yoder has struggled long and hard to make his minority voice heard among what might be called the Constantinian choruses.³ He has followed

¹Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Elkhart, Ind.: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 3003 Benham Ave., 46517), 557.

²Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1958), 3.

³Yoder interprets "'Constantinian' as a sociocultural reality independent of the fourth-century details" (*The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 214, n.3). In his chapter, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," he says, "This study shall seek to show summarily how some of the axioms of Western social thought are the product of the deep shift in

closely the developments of the World Council of Churches and other para-church bodies promoting church union. He has also formally participated in denominational dialogues.⁴ In this final chapter we will cast a critical eye upon Yoder's theology of the church and his ecumenical concern. To begin, we will outline what Yoder understands by the term *ecumenical*. Then, after presenting the nature of his ecumenical concern, we will consider some strengths and weaknesses. The last section of the chapter will conclude the thesis with some critical reflections on the entire paper.

A. What Yoder Regards as Ecumenical

In chapter two we discussed some of the influences that ecumenical conversations have had on Yoder.⁵ They prompted him to expand his

the relation of church and world for which Constantine soon became the symbol" (135). See also, idem, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 150ff.

⁴For example, Yoder joined other scholars in evaluating Gustafson's work as a Reformed theologian-ethicist. See, "Theological Revision and the Burden of Particular Identity," in *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments*, eds. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 63-94, and general discussion at the end of the book. See also Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Elkhart, Indiana: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 3003 Benham Ave., 46517), 557-578.

⁵For a chronology of the historic peace churches' ecumenical efforts at dialogue, see "40 Years of Ecumenical Theological Dialogue Efforts on Justice and Peace Issues by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the 'Historic Peace Churches,'" compiled by Yoder, in Yoder, Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, and Eugene F. Roop, eds., *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991), 93-105. The phrase "historic peace churches" includes Mennonites, Friends (Quakers), Brethren, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (107, n.3).

(Note continued on next page.)

thinking from a defense of his own faith and heritage, i.e., defending a scholarly return back to Anabaptist sources, to proclaiming the direction that all of Christianity should take. That is, Yoder suggests that the churches in Christendom surrender their territorial/establishment position and assume a more peace-, love- and justice-oriented minority position. Yoder does not intend to speak only for one small segment of the church. His task is clear:

Instead of asking what ethical positions come naturally to a church which finds itself in a minority... I should be trying to state that particular set of convictions about what should be the stance of the *whole* Christian community.⁶

Yoder's assumption is that there is a right way and a wrong way of being church. Part of ecumenical discussion is to gather together to discern the right ways and wrong ways. Or, to put it differently, Yoder, unlike some others, still believes there is a category of teaching called heresy. Yoder describes "the ordinary ethos of liberal Western ecumenism" as follows:

One assumes that it is proper for each denominational communion to have "their thing," perhaps thought of as their "gift" in analogy to the language of 1 Corinthians 12, or as their "talent." One assumes that each denomination's particularity is somehow "true," in that others should listen to it respectfully rather than calling it heretical as they used to.

...Thus the price of this good-mannered ecumenical openness to hear one another at our points of distinctiveness is a pluralism

A sampling of the contribution to these ecumenical conversations is documented in Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed., *On Earth Peace* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1978).

⁶Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 81.

that may replace the truth questions with a kind of uncritical celebration of diversity.⁷

Yoder, on the other hand, has set for himself the task of discerning the truth—the path of faithfulness for the church of Jesus Christ. The result takes the shape of his ecumenical concern.

Understanding of the term in history. From the Greek noun *oikouméne*, the word "ecumenical" means "of the whole world." In the early centuries after Christ this meant, "the whole known world, the Roman Empire."⁸ The council of Nicea in 325 and similar others, came to be called "Ecumenical Councils" because, according to Catholic historians, they represented the decisions of the whole empire. Bishops from all over the land gathered together, "decisions were made by majority vote, subject to the approval of the emperor, and then they became imperial law; and the minority could be forced, by banishment and other punishments, to submit."⁹ Yoder questions whether these councils were truly ecumenical at all. They did not represent "all the world." There were churches that separated from what came to be called the "orthodox" positions. In addition, the decisions made were sometimes done so by a bare majority. Yoder says,

Much confusion, not only in "ecumenical" affairs but also in basic Christian theology, has resulted from the failure of historians and theologians to recognize that these early councils were not truly ecumenical, and that the way they were called together and the way they deliberated were hardly worthy of a

⁷Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 80-81.

⁸Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 2.

⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

Christian body.¹⁰

Although he never states it so directly, Yoder maintains that there were other less-popular voices that were just as correct as the "orthodox" ones. For example, when discussing the issue of baptism and whether it should be for infants or for confessing adults, Yoder points to the "faithful remnant" that has survived over the centuries in spite of the opposition of the official majority.¹¹

A positive aspect of the church unity found within medieval Catholicism was the fact that there was room for freedom. That is, each region had a church with a minister that made organizational or doctrinal decisions. If conflicts could not be resolved, help was sought by appealing to the local bishop, who had authority in resolving such disputes. There developed a hierarchy of bishops, with the bishop at Rome being the highest bishop of all. Yoder says positively that the hierarchy of bishops was established not, "as many non-Catholics think, primarily because the popes were always crassly grasping for power. It happened also because a highest court of appeal was needed, once the episcopal system had been established."¹² Within this hierarchy was a measure of local autonomy, which, says Yoder, was a good thing. Another positive aspect of the medieval Catholic church was that it was truly international. These two values, international unity and local freedom, were both lost in the

¹⁰Ibid., 3.

¹¹Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 133. See also Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: MacMillan, 1968; reprint, Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1985).

¹²Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 27.

Reformation.

State-church Protestantism, whether Lutheran or Reformed, felt obliged to solicit the support of local government in order to resist the imperial government which favored Roman Catholicism. The result was permanent division on national lines.... Since the division centered upon a question of doctrine, both the Protestant confessions and, in reaction, Catholicism became far more strict in the definition of orthodoxy and in the persecution of new ideas.¹³

In order for the churches during the time of the Reformation to maintain their viability and their identity, they had to keep strong ties with the state and define narrow boundaries of orthodoxy.

To counter such parochialism, Yoder introduces an Anabaptist alternative to overcoming church division. Magisterial reformers tried to legislate unity by drafting confessions according to particular political regions.¹⁴ The unity thus achieved could at most be geographical or political. The Anabaptist alternative was more spiritual in nature. The "Anabaptists went to great lengths in seeking to overcome division."¹⁵ They called Christians to unite under the rule of Scripture, not under the rule of the sword or of the magistrates. Christians could gather together in the name of Christ and by so doing they would transcend national boundaries and confessional segregation.

In order to defend his claim to ecumenicity, Yoder has had to

¹³Ibid., 28.

¹⁴For a recent explanation on how he understands the term "magisterial," see Yoder, "Catholicity in Search of Location," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 306 ff.

¹⁵Ibid., 32.

overcome the charge of secessionism. He had to correct what he considers to be a false image of Anabaptists—their "break-to-be-faithful" disposition.¹⁶ Swiss Anabaptists did not break with Zwingli's reforming church in order to be faithful. They stayed in until they were forced to leave. Although Conrad Grebel and his friends disapproved of Zwingli's intention to effect religious reforms with the support of the city council, they kept in conversation with him for over a year.¹⁷ Grebel considered himself part of the same church as Zwingli and pleaded with him to make a clear separation between Christianity and earthly monarchies.

And yet Grebel did not start a new church. For more than a year Grebel and the friends who gathered with him waited. While waiting they went back, again and again, to Zwingli and his fellow ministers, trying to win them to their view that the church should be separate from the world. They did this with relation to the question of the abolition of the Mass; they did it with the proposal that Zwingli should provoke new elections in order to have an evangelical majority in the city council; they did it finally with respect to the question of believers' baptism.¹⁸

"The process of trying to break through to Zwingli and the council ... had taken *a year and a half*; and in the revolutionary days of the 1520's, a year and a half was a long time."¹⁹ "Far from using the 'break-to-be-faithful' principle, the Anabaptists refused, *for over a year*, to accept a break that was already there."²⁰ The groups eventually split because "it was clear that

¹⁶Ibid., 29.

¹⁷Ibid., 29ff.

¹⁸Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁹Ibid., 30, (italics mine).

²⁰Ibid., 31, (italics mine).

neither Zwingli nor the [city] council, even though both claimed to be Christian, could really be called upon to deal with disagreements on a Christian basis, i.e., before the criterion of Scripture."²¹

This illustrates that Yoder considers the Anabaptist church of that century to be the true church. The break was initiated by Zwingli and the city council.

If there must be a break within the church, between the unfaithful church and the faithful church, the initiative must come from the unfaithful side. God has taken the initiative to reconcile the world to Himself. If there is a break, it comes from the world's refusal, not from God.... The faithful church will discipline; she will expel, if necessary, one at a time, disobedient individuals. She will not, in so far as the choice is hers, withdraw from the body of believers.²²

This categorical thinking in terms of faithful and unfaithful has softened in tone in recent years, but the message has not changed.²³ Yoder sees in this sixteenth-century episode a model for overcoming divisions among Christians. "In fact there are good grounds for saying that the Anabaptists were the first ecumenical movement, in the positive sense of that word."²⁴ He gives at least three reasons for saying this: Theirs was the only truly international group, breaking down barriers between Christians by the rejection of the state church and war. They "refused to accept division as

²¹Ibid., 30.

²²Ibid., 33.

²³For example, in *The Priestly Kingdom* he criticizes the "ethos of liberal Western ecumenism" where the guideposts for evaluating right and wrong are set aside for the sake of respecting denominational particularity (Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 81).

²⁴Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 33.

final and came back again and again to discuss."²⁵ They refused to "define their faith exclusively in terms of hierarchy or a confession."²⁶ In the same paragraph as this statement he says,

To be a Christian according to "Anabaptist orthodoxy" you need neither sign nor join anything; you just practice Biblical baptism, communion, and discipline in your local congregation and accept Scripture as the criterion for all future discussion.²⁷

By adding this rigid set of criteria for what he calls "Anabaptist orthodoxy" he almost defeats his own argument. In essence, he says the church with no tradition has a distinct tradition of having no tradition. Yoder himself places restrictions on Anabaptist orthodoxy: you must "practice Biblical baptism," that is adult baptism upon confession of faith; practice biblical "communion," that is remembrance, not transsubstantiation, and is administered by all believers not only the clergy; and "accept Scripture as the criterion for all discussion." These boundaries of orthodoxy are not unlike those in other denominations. On the one hand, Luther cried *sola scriptura*, and on the other hand, Yoder claims to "accept Scripture as the criterion for all future discussion." How can both be correct? They both carry different assumptions for what it means to be Christian and biblical. These are wrapped up, as George Lindbeck points out, in a matrix of factors and function like culture and language.²⁸ What may be meaningful criteria for one may not even exist for the other. Even

²⁵Ibid., 34

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

though they use the same words, such as faithfulness, the Bible, confession, creed, discipleship, works, etc., they can talk past each other because they mean different things. Unless one lives in the other's world and "learns the language," there is really no way of evaluating the differences. This is not the same as a pluralistic relativism that says "what works for me is right for me, what works for you is right for you." This is saying "I do not have tools with which to compare the two approaches to doctrine." In this case, it means that Anabaptism may have its own functioning "orthodoxy," and the mainstream churches may have their own "radicality," but each do not have the wherewithal to perceive it.

One more facet of Yoder's understanding of the term ecumenical must be raised. He makes a distinction between American and European ecumenical thinking.²⁹ American ecumenical thinking works with the assumption that all denominations are on an equal basis and the question is how to bring the various organizations together. European ecumenical thinking operates under the assumption that each state primarily has one church, and the question is how the various churches can be friendly with churches of different nations. The task of the American groups is to minimize the differences, which often means "minimizing the importance of doctrinal fidelity."³⁰ The task of the European churches is to study the differences, learn about each other's heritage, and therefore keep an interest in distinct positions and maintain doctrinal fidelity. The differences in ecumenical thinking can be summed up by saying that Americans strive to

²⁹Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 8-9.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 8.

be *nondenominational*, and Europeans strive to be *inter* or *transdenominational*.³¹ Given Yoder's emphasis on historical roots, his affirmation of common heritage, his concern to maintain ecclesial identity, and his insistence of doctrinal fidelity, it is clear that Yoder conducts his ecumenical thinking from what he calls an European approach.

We come now to the point where it is instructive to consider a number of ways in which Yoder is predisposed to ecclesial unity. A call for unity is important, and it is often neglected by Mennonites. We have seen, in Yoder's use of Grebel's intention to reform the church from within, that he considers it Anabaptist to strive for church unity across (what would become in the Grebel-Zwingli case) denominational boundaries. Each of the following four emphases feed into and reinforce his view toward other Christian denominations.

Unity includes doctrinal division. Anabaptists tolerated differences of opinion, as long as they agreed to stay within the fellowship, that is, as long as they had ethical unity. Not everyone in the fellowship will think the same, but for the sake of unity, they will adhere to a common ethical code. The unity seen in the gathering of believers will be in the form of obedience or discipleship. "Christian unity is not to be created, but to be obeyed."³²

The formation of belief and practice should be under local control. He trusts that just as the Holy Spirit led the early church, the Spirit continues

³¹Ibid., 8-9. This contrast largely describes the situation in the late 1950s, early 1960s. It is worth reporting here because it shows nuances in Yoder's thought.

³²Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church*, 21.

to guide groups of believers. Yoder is confident that with this guidance in the interpretation and implementation of scripture, they will reach similar conclusions.

Excommunication is rare and should be redemptive. It is reserved as an option only for obstinate individuals that wish to belong but do not conform to the ethical requirements of the group. Excommunication, however, has its limits. It is for a definite time and the aim is redemption of the individual, not eternal banishment. This is not to be confused with the response to a group who believes differently. In this case, conversation and dialogue should continue so that the two groups can conform to a common ecclesial pattern.

Tolerance or acceptance is to be granted to other local groups who differ. For example, Yoder considers the other churches of the Reformation to be "big sister" churches.³³ He doesn't call them parent churches, which would be more affirming, yet he neither calls them churches of the devil, which is akin to some sixteenth-century anti-Catholic Anabaptist rhetoric.

B. Strengths and Weaknesses

There are several ways in which Yoder's concept of the church can work at bringing down the barriers that exist between churches and denominations. In so far as he calls all Christians to a renewed

³³"Which fragments of a theology will we now put together as a unity in their own right, when the ground floor is no longer dictated for us by a big sister church whose language we use in order to tell her that she is not radical enough in her reformation?" (Yoder, "The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen [Waterloo, ON: Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1979], 11).

commitment to the centre of their faith, that is, Jesus Christ, he moves toward unity. There are, however, ways in which Yoder's ecclesiology keep him from moving nearer to his ecclesial neighbours. At this point we will explore both of these dynamics, taking first Yoder's positive contributions.

Strengths. Yoder is committed to a Christian communion that transcends national boundaries. This is based on his understanding of Christ's lordship over the world. Christ is everyone's brother and Saviour, not only the people in any one country.³⁴ This is connected to his concept of atonement, where the death and resurrection of Christ has won a victory over the powers and structures of evil in the world.

Only if the call of Jesus is ontologically founded, connected to the arc from to creation to apocalypse, can it give us the leverage to challenge our conformity to our own age. This fulcrum from beyond the system is what the author to the Hebrews called the "confidence and pride of our hope."³⁵

All Christians, regardless of denomination or country, live in the new aeon and are to bring about the reign of the God all over the globe. In this sense, Yoder's christocentrism draws him nearer to the centre. Yoder's focus on scripture and on the creeds (for example, Chalcedon and Nicea) helps reinforce the common ground that he has with other Christians. He recognizes that all Christians strive for unity under the name of the same

³⁴Yoder, "Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World," *International Review of Missions* 68 (October 1979): 370.

³⁵Yoder, "That Household we Are," unpublished manuscript prepared for the conference "Is There a Believers' Church Christology?" Bluffton, Ohio, 1980, General Papers, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana, 7.

founder, who was both God and human, who cared for both peace in eternity and in the present.

Yoder's emphasis on Christian commitment to a local fellowship over against nominal affiliation with a church or denomination is constructive. It enables him to downplay the doctrinal differences that exist across denominations in the name of Christian discipleship.³⁶ For example, because of their common conviction to discovering the meaning of the Christian life, Yoder would recognize Latin American base ecclesial communities, Anglican Bible study groups, and Mennonite Bible study groups each as groups faithful to Christ.

Another avenue for ecumenical rapprochement is through common ethical considerations such as human-rights issues, capital punishment, environmental issues, justice for aboriginal people, and peace issues. The appeal to faithfulness to Jesus Christ and action in the area of social issues, provides an avenue upon which Yoder can converge with members of other churches. Yoder challenges the spiritualizing of Christianity by stressing that Jesus was a political threat to the establishment and, as a result of *that*, suffered fatal consequences. The church, not because of its rallying around a cause, but through its faithfulness to its founder, should be making costly challenges to an establishment that harbours injustice. An emphasis on ethical unity over doctrinal unity allows people to come together and to work in harmony even if they do not entirely agree with the theories that led them together. A focus on ethics offers bridges for

³⁶Yoder also says that Jesus Christ, as portrayed by a Believers' church Christology, transcends the cosmologies of various periods of intellectual development, and is therefore a further unifying dimension (ibid.).

transcultural cooperation.³⁷

Weaknesses. Several parts of Yoder's ecumenical concern keep him from moving toward his ecumenical neighbours, and vice versa. First of all, Yoder is critical of easy tolerance—of the view that there are many right ways.³⁸ In comparing Yoder with the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr, Gayle Gerber Koontz has noted that

Yoder's development of radical nonresistant Christocentric theology and ethics, for example, excludes a larger portion of the visible Christian church as well as excludes more persons in other religious traditions from being considered persons of "true" faith than would Niebuhr's theocentric formulation which would include anyone who trusts in and is loyal to a faithful, just, gracious creator who is creating a universal human community.³⁹

Yoder assumes that there is only one faithful way. For example, in *Preface to Theology*, Yoder recognizes that each major Christian view (i.e., Orthodox, Roman, Protestant, and "Sectarian") has its own historical line of

³⁷"Biblically, pastorally, and ecumenically the claim of liberation is strong. It exemplifies the claim that *ethics is not separable from the rest of theology without denaturing both*," Yoder, "The Experiential Etiology of Evangelical Dualism," *Missiology: An International Review* 11,4 (October 1983): 458 (italics mine).

³⁸See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 80-81, and Duane K. Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict: A Realist Pacifist Perspective*, (Scottdale, Pa., Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1986), who also is critical of a methodological relativism which can "cut the nerve of genuine dialogue." Friesen says, "We can only have genuine dialogue with someone when we seek to test our position in terms of a common search for truth" (171).

³⁹Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1985), 263-264.

faithfulness. However, he considers this diversity to be an aberration. Yoder sees only one single line:

There are various ways in which the church is called back to her norm. It is not simply a matter of a line going on and being right or all the lines going on and being right together. *No ecumenical pluralism, where you say "we need all these lines."* It is rather a matter of how the church is either unfaithful or restored to faithfulness.⁴⁰

In a review of Guy F. Hershberger's *The Rediscovery of the Anabaptist Vision*⁴¹ Yoder asks, "Is it not out of place in the 'ecumenical age' to give renewed attention to a small group's peculiar heritage?... Is it right for Christians to give this much attention to one narrow slice of church history?"⁴² To the latter question his answer is a resounding, "Yes." It is proper to make an Anabaptist concept of the church central because of its ability to apply the teachings of the Bible in another age than that of the Bible.

The position they took was clearer, just at this point as far as present scholarship knows, than that of any other major movement of renewal within Christendom. Their testimony was, as ours must be, that the New Testament view of the church is in its core just as final, just as authoritative, just as adequate for other ages, as the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith.... For this reason they merit our attention

⁴⁰ Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, Indiana: Goshen Biblical Seminary, distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 1981), 119 (italics mine).

⁴¹ Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957).

⁴² Yoder, "Marginalia," *Concern Pamphlet #8* (Scottdale, Pa.: Concern, May 1960), 47-48.

in a special way.⁴³

Yoder is rightly critical of an easy tolerance where one says "we need all these lines of faithfulness." Historically the churches have made errors and these need to be recognized and addressed. But it is precisely this criticism of tolerance which makes his position somewhat exclusive and therefore less amicable for ecumenical discussions.

A second aspect of Yoder's method which makes it difficult for others to speak with him is his reading of history. It can be granted to him that he has his particular rendering of church history, e.g. the church fell at Constantine.⁴⁴ Yoder asserts over against other church histories that his rendering of the past is the true one. He seeks not only to convince his establishmentarian neighbours, but also to win them over to his "sectarian," or "messianic communitarian" side.⁴⁵ He justifies such claims by appealing to scripture, claiming that his view is in line with the discipleship of the early church. As long as Yoder maintains that his reading of history is the only true one, he continues to reach out to his neighbours, trying to pull converts in to his communal epistemology. To be sure, Yoder's emphasis on having Jesus as the sole norm for the Christian life has the potential to bring Christian groups together. Most, if not all, Christians look to Jesus Christ for central guidance. But an emphasis on Jesus as norm can be restrictive for Yoder when he develops too many of his own "sub-norms."

⁴³Ibid., 48.

⁴⁴Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 82ff.

⁴⁵Ibid., chapter 3, "The Authority of Tradition," pp. 63-79, and chapter 4, "The Kingdom as Social Ethic," pp. 80-101.

C. Concluding Comments

The main aim of this thesis has been to outline and explain Yoder's theology—particularly his concept of the church. The major contention is that Yoder's ecclesiology is thorough-going, thought-provoking, and contributes positively to contemporary theology. The emphasis on the local community of believers is the hallmark of his ecclesiology. Here lies the strength of his proposition. This hallmark has much potential. It serves a conciliatory function between different theologies. It can bring different views of the church alongside each other. It can form a basis for groups to measure their Christian commonalty. That is, a definition of the church in terms of Christian community is instructive not just for an Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, but can illuminate other Christian theologies. It can do this without requiring them to become Anabaptist-Mennonites.

Yoder's definition of the church as a gathered community of biblically-guided adult believers informs all the significant areas of his theology. This definition informs his understanding of peace, believer's baptism, radical discipleship, and counter-culture ethics. At the root of this definition is his assumption that the church on earth is identified with the kingdom of God.⁴⁶ The church is seen as the incarnation of Christ on earth today. It must be a visible presence in society, one which models to the "old" world how the "new" world will be. It is the conscience of society.⁴⁷ Yoder identifies the kingdom of God closely with historical groups. This thesis writer would want to see more room made for other expressions and

⁴⁶See ch. 1 above.

⁴⁷See ch. 5, pp. 131 ff. above

possibilities for the kingdom of God. For example, Jesus said the kingdom of God is either mystically present in individuals unbeknownst to themselves, or it is present in the future.⁴⁸ Moreover, in the New Testament we learn that sometimes those who claim to know exactly about the works of God in humanity are wrong. Jesus said "many have called me Lord, Lord, and I will say I never knew them." Matthew records some surprises about who is in the kingdom and who is not. To be sure Jesus told his followers that the kingdom of God is at hand. Nonetheless, these instances serve to remind theologians and ethicists to keep definitions of who is "in" and who is "out" at least somewhat tentative.

Yoder's emphasis on the church as a visible body may keep him from recognizing and affirming the work of God elsewhere (e.g., in other Christians and members of society). Granted, Yoder has "middle axioms" against which he can measure the work of so-called non-Christians and social structures. Granted, he does recognize that sometimes non-Christians will exercise a higher level of morality than Christians. However, these categories of thought are not the most helpful in this situation. The root of this criticism lies with Yoder's ecclesiology and his two-kingdom, church-world dichotomy. The distinction between the church and the world may not be as clear as Yoder would want it to be. A further comment can be made about Yoder's concept of the church as an ideal. The church as defined by Yoder has never existed, nor can it ever exist. It can be granted that some individuals live radical lives. Some pockets of Mennonites have made religiously motivated political statements. But rarely are these groups local

⁴⁸Matthew 25.

congregations. Yoder has constructed a theology of the church around an impossible Anabaptist ethic. Perhaps it is correct in theory, but it does not reflect reality. Yoder is aware that his ecclesiology is an ideal. Yoder is under no illusions that any church can actually live out this ideal. For example, he says that Mennonite reality is often far from the Anabaptist vision. "The agenda of the grass roots church is often not the Anabaptist agenda of mission and social change in reconciliation, but the acculturation agenda: 'when do we get an organ,' 'what do we do about the covering,' 'when do we get a seminary trained preacher,' and 'when do we get a church building that does not look like a barn?'"⁴⁹ He nonetheless sees it as essential to hold the vision of the ideal church before the people.

When Yoder says that members of the church will exhibit a "higher level of morality" than the rest of society, he does not indicate in detail what this might mean. How is it different when Christians show self-less love, kindness, and mercy than when non-Christians do the same? What is the place for a just Jew, moral Hindu, or ethical non-believer in Yoder's theology of the church? Do these people need to become disciples of Jesus even if they are already practicing many of the ways of Jesus? In this case it would perhaps be better to say that church members *ought to* have a higher level of morality, and that they often do, but not always. Furthermore, it is fairer to those moral people outside the church to simply admit that there are people not in the church that will behave in a more "Christ-like manner" than some Christians.

⁴⁹Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, Calif.: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 17.

At times Yoder sounds like he is presenting his own form of gnosticism. That is, he is presenting a view of reality that only committed insiders accept as true. This alternate view of reality does not make sense to outsiders because they are not "in the know." Evidence of this is seen in his theology when he uses phrases such as the church carries "the true meaning of history."⁵⁰ It is as if all of the world has misunderstood history, and that the church will set it right. In one sense, Yoder would admit that he is conveying a kind of gnosticism.

The basic thing that we try to say to modern man is, "your world view is wrong; you have got to learn a foreign world view that we have got in our book [i.e., the Bible] here," the missionary impact of this will be that of a modern gnosticism and not the impact which the New Testament testimony had.⁵¹

But in another sense, Yoder's message is not gnostic in any way. He is not dealing with an unreal world view. Rather, he is dealing with the very real stuff of history—the historical life and words of Jesus and the church.

Yoder says Jesus sacrificed "effectiveness" by rejecting the crown and accepting the cross. Jesus "thereby excluded any normative concern for any capacity to make sure that things would turn out right."⁵² That is, Yoder looks to Jesus as a person who did not consider the effectiveness of his actions. He merely strove to be faithful to God. Another way to look at the life of Jesus is to see that he rejected the option of violence not only out of faithfulness but out of the sensible conviction that violence is inherently wrong. For example, if Jesus would have chosen the route of violence,

⁵⁰Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 11.

⁵¹Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 187.

⁵²Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 240.

more people would have been hurt, and the earth would receive one more violent person. As he chose the way of peace, the earth received one more peaceful person. Or, in the words of Duane K. Friesen,

Means and ends are integrally connected. The cause of injustice can be obtained only ultimately through nonviolent means. The meaning of history is not based upon a utilitarian calculus about the likelihood of good or bad results that may issue from the use of violence, but in a principled commitment to the use of nonviolence as the only way in which true liberation can come about. The cross symbolizes the refusal of Christ to sacrifice the dignity of others for the sake of a just cause.⁵³

Interpreted in this way, Jesus's actions make sense and one can say he *was* concerned for effectiveness, but he saw things from a transcendent point of view.⁵⁴

Yoder's theology of sin might be enhanced by more discussion on the collective dimension of sin. To his credit, Yoder thoroughly and convincingly conveys his understanding of the power of evil manifest in the structure of the world.⁵⁵ But when the discussion turns to how sin affects a person, his writing is conspicuously scant. Furthermore, Yoder's discussion about sin tends to focus on sin as an *act*, and not sin as a

⁵³Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict*, 168.

⁵⁴"This view of the Church commends itself exegetically and theologically.... It refuses to accept pragmatic grounds for deciding how Christians should relate themselves to the world. And yet after saying this we observe that this Biblical approach is in fact the most effective....

[The church] will be most effective where [it] abandons effectiveness and intelligence for the foolish weakness of the Cross in which are the wisdom and the power of God" (Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 [October 1961]: 294-295).

⁵⁵See his discussion of Christ and power in *The Politics of Jesus*, pp. 135-162.

condition.⁵⁶ For example, he will say in critical response to Reinhold Niebuhr that Niebuhr has "no place for the doctrine of regeneration, since the saint for him is still a sinner."⁵⁷ The implication here is that once a person experiences Christian salvation, he or she ceases to be a sinner. But this is not so for Yoder. He sees two kinds of divine grace at work: forgiving grace and enabling grace.⁵⁸ Through confession of sin and reliance on God through Christ, one receives forgiving grace. But one is further enabled by grace to perform works and deeds otherwise not possible. Yoder says, "The Bible speaks of our 'resurrection with Christ' as opening new ethical possibilities."⁵⁹ Yoder says Niebuhr fails to develop a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He says Niebuhr fails to acknowledge that there is *power* imparted to believers. This power is "a working reality within history and especially within the church. This *power* opens a brand-new realm of historical possibilities: not simple possibilities, but *crucial* possibilities."⁶⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr portrayed the human situation as one of freedom. He said anxiety

⁵⁶See ch. 5, p. 116 above.

⁵⁷Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Heerewegen Pamphlet Number One (Zeist, The Netherlands: 1954), 21. Reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101-117.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁹*Ibid.* "There are thus about the community of disciples those sociological traits most characteristic of those who set about to change society: a visible structured fellowship, a sober decision guaranteeing that the costs of commitment to the fellowship have been consciously accepted, *and a clearly defined life style different from that of the crowd.* This life style is different, not because of arbitrary rules separating the believer's behavior from that of 'normal people,' but because of the exceptionally normal quality of humanness to which the community is committed" (Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 46-47).

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

is the "inevitable concomitant of human freedom." Sin inevitably follows this anxiety and "expresses itself in every human activity and creativity."⁶¹ Niebuhr's primary disagreement with pacifists stems from his biblical anthropological understanding that none of what humans do can ever be free from the taint of sin. He says that pacifists "do not see that sin introduces an element of conflict into the world and that even the most loving relations are not free of it. They are, consequently, unable to appreciate the complexity of the problem of justice."⁶² Niebuhr therefore develops his Christian ethics with the assumption that people are sinners. Yoder, on the other hand, develops his Christian ethics with the assumption that people who become Christians sin less, or are more liberated from the power sin has over them, and can therefore act less selfishly. Yoder therefore asserts that "Christian ethics is for Christians."⁶³

Perhaps one of Yoder's greatest contributions relates to his emphasis on the local gathering and an epistemology based on the sociology of knowledge. To get past the point where we compare each others' doctrines and either dogmatically pronounce one wrong and one right, or say that both are partly right in the spirit of pluralistic relativism, we need a third way of framing the problem.⁶⁴ In the first case we can only argue past each

⁶¹"Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin" (Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol. I [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964], 182).

⁶²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 14.

⁶³Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," 294.

⁶⁴"Is there some other approach to the truth question, different both

other because of different convictions, theological foundations, and sources of authority. In the second case we move no further ahead in our quest for Christian unity because of the tendency to accept the status quo, namely the diversity with which we may or may not agree. Yoder offers us insight with his epistemological sectarianism. That is, as one group seeks out the guidance of the Holy Spirit so does another group in another time and in another place. Depending on circumstances, the word from God will be different to each group in a different language. Each group will act on what they have understood to be the will of God. That is, each group will develop their own set of ethics. This involves a two-fold trust: we have to trust that the next church group can competently discern the will of God in the spirit of the canon; and, we have to trust that God will reveal God's person to each new group of seekers.

At the core of this understanding is the assumption that a person in one group does not have the ability to understand the will of God as it is revealed to another group. The reason for this is the difference between culture and language. Even though the human condition may be the same, and even though God's message to humanity may be the same, each culture and language group will have their own way of understanding the "word of God."⁶⁵ This is not the same as relativistic pluralism, because I

from coercive uniformity after magisterial models, and from pluralistic inclusivism? The free church makes that claim; there are ways to disavow coercion without giving up on the truth; namely, through binding dialogue under the rule of Scripture" (Yoder, "Introduction," in *Baptism and Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. by Merle D. Strege [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Sagamore Books, 1986], 6-7).

⁶⁵See Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to doctrine in *The Nature*

cannot say whether what you believe is right is really right, for I have no way of knowing. In effect this is a kind of doctrinal agnosticism. I can, however, with time and energy, learn your language and begin to understand your beliefs, doctrines, etc. Even then, however, the two may not be compared because of the lack of tools, or simply because the two are born out of entirely different circumstances.

A final comment relates to Yoder's focus on ethics. As two different Christian groups gather to discern the meaning of scripture, they will converge on one point. They will converge on the matter of ethics. The hope for progress in ecumenical discussions lies only partially in a world council created to bring various doctrines together with the formation of a "world Christian creed." One way to get past the divisions between the churches lies in the realm of ethics. Yoder is instructive at just this point.⁶⁶

of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984). In this approach, we are not to understand doctrine in propositional terms, i.e., where we essentially have a roster of eternal truth statements. Rather, doctrine functions more like a language or culture. With a propositional understanding, when two doctrines meet in the context of ecumenical dialogue, for example, one would compare the various doctrinal tenets, e.g. Christology, Trinity, original sin, etc. In the cultural-linguistic approach one has to step back and say, "I don't know what you mean, I don't speak that language, those concepts are entirely foreign to me, I have no categories in which to place those ideas, and therefore I cannot even begin to compare my religion with yours."

⁶⁶"Our age is marked by cultural pluralisms. There are many groups of people, each with their own languages.... But when we do not talk the same language how are we going to draw these lines [beyond which run heresy]? To the extent to which theology is doctrine, it is harder and harder, and that is why the churches are falling down in our age in any way of defining heresy. *But if theology relates to ethics, then we do have a common world in which we behave, because we behave with each other.* We do know what it means when we are behaving differently and coming to opposite way of

(Note continued on next page.)

He is suggesting that local communities tolerate some doctrinal differences and converge on common ethical concerns. In fact, this is what is happening. As the various churches seek to be faithful to Christ, they must act out of love and concern for the neighbour. This love takes trans-national expression and can be felt across cultural boundaries. Hence we are witnessing a convergence on ethical issues such as the prohibition of nuclear war, economic justice for the poor and for indigenous peoples, and relief for disaster-stricken areas.⁶⁷ Yoder's insistence that Christian ethics are for Christians may very well provide a direction for the churches. The most hopeful route of convergence down the spokes of the ecumenical wheel lies along the road of faithfulness to Jesus Christ manifest in a variety of ethical concerns which necessarily transcend national, cultural, racial, and class boundaries.

acting with regard to what we do with money or sex or the sword, or race, or the neighbor, or our housing. We are in fact, through our sociological awareness, through our experience in living with each other, and through our communications media, more able than before to know whether we are behaving the same" (Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 299-300 [italics mine]).

⁶⁷It should be noted that there are many ethical issues on which sections of the church disagree. Consider the division among Christians on issues such as the right to have an abortion or not, homosexual rights and affirmation, sex education in schools, and how governments should direct social spending.

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