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ABSTRACT

Theologies of culture often focus on either Christ or creation as their primary source, to the exclusion of the other. At best, this approach is incomplete because it does not account for the continuity between creation and redemption. At worst, it posits a divide not simply between Christ and creation, but between persons of the Trinity, presuming contradictory moral and cultural norms issuing from different persons of the Trinity. John Howard Yoder is often depicted as a representative of a Christocentric and creation-deficient approach to culture. Against that faulty representation, this dissertation argues that Yoder advocates a Trinitarian theology of culture that upholds the continuity and coherence between God's work in creation and in redemption.

To see why Yoder can be characterized as Trinitarian, his thought must be placed in the context of his engagement with the Niebuhrs, as well as Nicea and Chalcedon. For Yoder, Scripture leads us to the conclusion that Jesus' humanity makes him directly relevant to culture and Jesus' divinity directly connects him to creation. Inasmuch as the creeds are faithful translations of Scripture, they also lead to this conclusion. Yoder's focus on Christ does not come at the expense of his doctrine of creation, for he contends that humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and that the Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing. Moreover, the power unleashed in Jesus restores and re-establishes the politics of creation in that God's original intentions for human life are revealed and validated in Jesus. This does not include sword-bearing, which is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation. God's

providential allowance for the sword must not be confused or conflated with God's creative and redemptive will. Finally, Yoder argues that true cultural transformation depends on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking kingdom of God. The practices of the church will inevitably overflow and have transformative effects not only in the church but also in all of human culture. The dissertation concludes with implications of Yoder's contention that creation and redemption must cohere in our theology of culture.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Radical Trinitarianism and a Theology of Culture

How do we articulate the coherence and continuity between God's work in creation and redemption in a way that reflects the coherence and continuity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? More specifically, how does this continuity and coherence affect our theology of culture? Can God's will for cultural life ever contradict what is revealed in Jesus? If Jesus is not only redeemer but also the agent of creation, how does this affect our interpretation of both Christ and creation with respect to culture? Although several studies in recent decades investigate the general question of Christ, creation, and culture, few attempt to articulate how a coherent view of creation and Christ inform a theology of culture. More than a half-century ago, H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* set the framework for discussing these topics, but it makes only brief references to how Christ and culture relate to creation. More recently, Craig Carter has critically assessed Niebuhr's text, but he does not focus on the relation of Christ or culture to creation. D. A. Carson has revisited the relationship between Christ and culture as well, attempting to bring the insights of biblical theology to bear on the discussion. John G. Gibbs gives an excellent outline of the relationship between creation and redemption in Pauline theology, but he stops short of drawing conclusions about its impact on culture. Both J. Budziszewski and J. Daryl Charles emphasize the natural law as a creational foundation for culture, but they do not explain in detail how natural law

relates to Christ. Jeremy Begbie argues that any theology of culture ought to show how Christ and creation cohere, and he examines one particular aspect of human culture—the arts—through this lens. Colin Gunton provides what is probably the most thorough attempt in recent decades to systematically relate Christ, creation, and culture in Trinitarian categories.¹ Though these works address their respective topics in a helpful manner, none of them focuses on the specific task of showing how the coherence between Christ and creation informs a holistic theology of culture.

When the nexus of Christ, creation, and culture is considered, several questions arise. There is the question of epistemology: Does creation provide universally accessible moral knowledge (through natural law or creation orders), as opposed to the historical and therefore limited moral knowledge revealed in Scripture, particularly in the person and work of Christ? There are questions of continuity: Do the moral norms revealed in Christ contradict those given in creation or natural law? How does the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 relate to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20? Do God's purposes for human life and culture as revealed in the New Testament stand in continuity or discontinuity with the Old Testament? If Jesus is the true image of God, how does that affect our interpretation of the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1? There are also questions of soteriology: Is redemption focused primarily on the individual's relationship with God or

¹ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: A Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991); J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2006); J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971); and Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998).

does it also deal with the cultural life of humanity? Is the redemption or transformation of fallen cultures a possibility?

These questions of epistemology, continuity, and soteriology in turn point to underlying Trinitarian questions: How is the Father's role in creation related to the Son's work of redemption? If one who has seen the Son has also seen the Father and if the fullness of God dwells in bodily form in Jesus, what does the redemptive work of Christ tell us about the Maker of heaven and earth? If Jesus is the Son of God, the Word through whom, by whom, and for whom all things were created, what does this tell us about the original good creation of Genesis 1-2? If the Holy Spirit unites us with the risen and ascended Christ who remains not only very God but also very man, what does this tell us about the connection between the shape of the Church's life and its conformity to the shape of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? In sum, if we are to affirm that the external works of the Trinitarian God are undivided, what implications does this have for a theology of culture and the social ethics of the Church? The answers we give to questions about the interrelationship of Christ, creation, and culture are intertwined with the answers we give to questions about the Trinitarian God.

Thesis

This dissertation argues that John Howard Yoder has a Trinitarian theology of culture that upholds the continuity and coherence between God's work in creation and redemption.² The coherence between creation and redemption is directly related to the

² Yoder explicitly and repeatedly emphasizes the continuity and connection between creation and redemption. For example, see John Howard Yoder, "Creation and Gospel," *Perspectives: A Journal of*

coherence and unity of the persons and work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Unlike those who pit creation against redemption or conflate creation and fall, Yoder's theology of culture adequately accounts for the unity of the economic Trinity.

Jesus Christ is the center of Yoder's theology of culture. In Jesus' humanity, Christ and culture are immediately related. Humanity's social, cultural, and political life has its norm in Jesus, who is the true image of God. According to Yoder, Jesus, as the Second Adam, reveals the nature of true cultural power: it is for service, not for domination. In Jesus' divinity, Christ and creation are immediately related. The Word who became flesh is the Word by whom all things were created in the beginning. The God at work in creation is the same God at work in redemption. What God desires of humanity's cultural life in creation does not contradict what God desires of humanity's cultural life in redemption and reconciliation. If either Christ's divine or his human nature is denied, or if the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures is denied, Yoder's theology of culture ceases to make sense. Conversely, the theology of culture espoused by Yoder is grounded in Scripture and compatible with the ecumenical creeds.

Moreover, the God of creation and redemption is the God who is guiding the Church and all creation to its appointed destiny. Yoder sees the Church's life as a sacramental presence and power. The Church is empowered by the Spirit and rooted in both a creational and a new creational way of being cultural. In its life together, the

Reformed Thought 3, no. 8 (Oct. 1988): 8-10; "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 61-62; "Reformed versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May-June 1985), 5-6; and "That Household We Are," (unpublished address, Believers Church Conference on "Is There a Believers' Church Christology?" Bluffton, OH, Oct. 23-25, 1980), 8.

Church participates in the true power granted to humanity as *imago Dei*. It does so by following Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Yoder's Spirit-empowered ecclesiology underscores the need for careful discernment about existing cultural practices and the need to pioneer new cultural practices. Yoder highlights five sacraments that do just that, and his work on the sacraments breaks down any strict dichotomy between public and private life, between culture and religion, and between creation and Christ. Yoder's theology of culture thus reflects the unity of the economic Trinity: the Father who creates and reveals himself by the Son, the Son who does the will of the Father, and the Spirit who leads the Church along the way of Jesus to the glory of the Father. Taken together, these form the indivisible unity of his Trinitarian theology of culture.

If Yoder has a Trinitarian theology of culture that is biblically based, then his theology and ethics should receive a fair hearing, especially among evangelical and Reformed Christians who want to be faithful to both Scripture and classical orthodoxy. Yoder is often dismissed, however, because his pacifism is thought to be problematic for reasons shaped by Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr. For example, Yoder is said to be "against culture," not for transforming it. "Responsible" Christian political and cultural engagement cannot appeal to Jesus, but to realism about human sin or to natural law. A pacifist position can be faithful to Jesus, but it cannot be relevant to the "real world" of culture, society, and politics. An emphasis on the politics of Jesus is not Trinitarian, because a rejection of the sword entails a rejection of the creation order and God the Father as Creator. All these objections have been leveled at Yoder's theology.

The Niebuhrs, however, are not orthodox in the classical sense and they never claimed to be. Consequently, one may subscribe to the underlying liberalism of the Niebuhrs and reject Yoder, but one may not commandeer the Niebuhrs' theological or ethical framework to criticize Yoder while also claiming to do so on orthodox grounds. The social ethics of the Niebuhrs, including Reinhold's argument against pacifism, follows precisely from their *refusal* of classical orthodoxy. Therefore, evangelical and Reformed Christians who desire conversation partners regarding a theology of culture that is biblically grounded and theologically orthodox should look not to the Niebuhrs but to Yoder.

Several standard criticisms of Yoder are pervasive, but grounded in poor readings of Yoder.³ At this point in Yoder scholarship, what is needed is a fair reading of Yoder's thought that attends to the breadth of his corpus. This dissertation therefore does not seek

³ For charges that Yoder is Marcionitic and insufficiently Trinitarian, see John W. Miller, "In the Footsteps of Marcion: Notes toward an Understanding of John Yoder's Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 2 (1998): 82-92; A. James Reimer, "'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 249-251; Reimer, "Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16 (Spring 1998): 12. Reimer also notes Yoder's apparent ambivalence toward Trinitarian orthodoxy in "Biblical and Systematic Theology: Two Parallel but Related Activities," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Pandora Press: Kitchener, ON/Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA, 2001), 253-256. J. Denny Weaver approvingly cites Yoder's "relativizing" of the creeds in *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 92-96; and "The United States Shape of Mennonite Theologizing: Some Preliminary Observations," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 7, no. 3 (July 1999), 639-640.

For charges that Yoder has a deficient doctrine of creation, see J. Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices in Evangelical Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); J. Daryl Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," *First Things* 168 (Dec. 2006): 33-38; Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 137-141; Guenther Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 108-129; A. James Reimer, "A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 245-273; Gerald Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as an Augustinian Interlocutor," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 221-244; and Nigel Goring Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 163-166.

to level new criticisms at Yoder's work, but to show that many standard ones do not in fact hold. I demonstrate that scholars cannot dismiss Yoder's theology as a sectarian emphasis on Jesus that ignores how the doctrine of the Trinity or doctrine of creation impacts our "broader" life as cultural beings in God's creation. Indeed, Yoder helps to show why neither the politics of Jesus nor the politics of creation is more public or private, more communicable or sectarian, than the other. The Word that ordered the creation is the same enfleshed Word that provides the shape our lives ought to take in and with creation. The Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation hovers over the life of the new creation, shaping Christ's body to live with the grain of the universe so that we might hear the pronouncement, "It is very good."

Two Approaches to Christ, Creation, and Culture

Rooted in Creation

Theologies of culture are often constructed by taking one of two broad approaches: either Christ or creation is foundational.⁴ There are several ways to start with creation as most basic. One way is to emphasize natural law, a path taken both by Protestant and Roman Catholic thinkers. Another way is the neo-Calvinist emphasis on creation orders and sphere sovereignty, originating in Abraham Kuyper, and flowering in both his Dutch and North American heirs. Whether articulated as general revelation, a doctrine of creation orders, natural law, the first "act" in the biblical drama, or theological

⁴ Robin Parry, "Evangelicalism and Ethics," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 173-174.

anthropology, this position begins with the reality of God as creator and the nature and destiny of humanity in God's created order.⁵ This approach outlines the meaning of humanity in general and God's intentions for human life on the good earth, and then it relates both Christ and culture back to that foundational framework. This creation-centered approach emphasizes the revelatory status of the book of nature not only for knowing God, but also for knowing God's will for human culture and ethics. Although sin is taken seriously, the epistemological and moral effects of the fall are such that humans can still, to some extent, know and do what God desires.

This view has strengths: it begins with creation, which is the starting point of Scripture; it takes seriously the enduring goodness of God's creation, despite the entrance of sin and death into the created order; and it roots its theology of culture in a robust

⁵ For example, see Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 208; Brunner, "Nature and Grace," in *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, 1946; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 15-64 (page citations are to the reprint edition); J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart*; Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003); J. Daryl Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," 33-38; Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1979), 40-60; Guenther Haas, "Creational Ethics Is Public Ethics," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 12 (2007), 13; Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives," 108-129; Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 44-78; David P. Kozyis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 189-201; Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), iii, 53, 70-71, 78; Richard J. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 21-36; H. Evan Runner, *Scriptural Religion and Political Task* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1974), 27-44; H. H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 102-117; Douglas Schuurman, *Creation, Eschaton, and Ethics: The Ethical Significance of Creation-Eschaton Relation in the Thought of Emil Brunner and Jürgen Moltmann* (New York: Peter Land, 1991), 165; Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 43-60; Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 13-15.

theological anthropology.⁶ Epistemologically-speaking, there is an emphasis on creation rather than fall. Although the fall affects what we can know, the emphasis lies on those things revealed in creation, both external and internal to humanity, that we can still know. In addition, advocates of a creation-centered approach often give a complex account of the variety of institutions and orders that are ordained by God for the flourishing of human life. For example, the Roman Catholic emphasis on natural law and the neo-Calvinist emphasis on sphere sovereignty have both proved fruitful in accounting for the complex nature of human social life.⁷

But this approach also has weaknesses. The emphasis on creation risks downplaying the moral and noetic effects of the fall, so that the effects of human sin are not taken as seriously as they should be. More crucially, some with this view see creation and redemption as not only different or complementary, but also as contradictory, such that God's will in creation and redemption appear to be at odds.⁸ In addition, it is not always clear how creation and culture relate to Christ. Since creation reveals what we ought to do and be in culture, Christ may be seen as performing the task of restoration,

⁶ Albert M. Wolters, "Creation Order: A Historical Look at Our Heritage," in *An Ethos of Compassion and the Integrity of Creation*, ed. Brian J. Walsh, Hendrik Hart, and Robert E. VanderVennen (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 33-48.

⁷ For an account of the similarities and differences between these two traditions, see Jonathan Chaplin, "Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Catholic and Reformed Conceptions of the Role of the State," in *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*, ed. Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 175-201.

⁸ For example, in *The Divine Imperative*, Brunner posits a sharp distinction between creation and redemption in his thematic proposition on "The Natural Orders and the Kingdom of God," saying, "As Creator, God requires us to recognize and adjust ourselves to the orders he has created, as our first duty; as Redeemer, as our second duty, He bids us ignore the existing orders, and inaugurate a new line of action in view of the coming kingdom of God" (208). For Brunner, the natural orders include five "forms of community" that are derived from creation: marriage and family, economic life, the state, culture, and the church. Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, 330-333.

but not revelation. For example, Wolters focuses on the healings worked by Jesus, thus affirming the goodness of the body and Jesus' restoration of the ability to contribute to culture and society.⁹ But there is a sense in which Jesus brings nothing new to our understanding of culture and society. Although he shows us the nature and character of God, he does not reveal anything that we did not already know about what it means to be human. As Mouw puts it, this view treats the New Testament's witness to Jesus as "little more than a 're-publishing' of the politics of creation."¹⁰ Because of this overemphasis on creation and underemphasis on redemption, a creation-centered approach may lead to problems in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are divided or competing with one another, rather than cohering in the work of creation and redemption.¹¹ At their worst, some who begin with creation emphasize a static order embedded in creation, which ends up making Christianity a religion of the status quo that does not take seriously the earth-shaking advent of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ.¹² In the end, this view falls short of providing a good biblical and theological account of how Christ and creation are related and thereby both inform culture. Without such coherence, it is not properly biblical or Trinitarian.

⁹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 61-64.

¹⁰ Richard Mouw, "Creational Politics: Some Calvinist Amendments," *Christian Scholar's Review* 23, no. 2 (1993): 191.

¹¹ See the criticisms offered by Jeremy Begbie, "Creation, Christ, and Culture in Dutch Neo-Calvinism," in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1989), 123-127; Cornelis van der Kooi, "A Theology of Culture: A Critical Appraisal of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace," in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of his Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 99-100; and Richard J. Mouw, "Abandoning the Typology: A Reformed Assist," in *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May-June 1985), 9.

¹² John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 202.

Centered in Christ

A second broad approach to Christ, creation, and culture emphasizes Christ and the new creation.¹³ This is done in a variety of ways: the Christocentrism of Barth and those who follow him, the Anabaptist and Baptist emphasis on witness and discipleship, and the nineteenth-century liberal humanism and twenty-first century evangelical piety that both ask: What would Jesus do? For this broad approach, Christ rather than creation is the primary source of norms for human life and culture. As true God and true human, Jesus is the central and determinative revelation of both God and humanity, such that he reveals how we ought to live in this world. He is not merely a religious teacher about the relationship between God and individual humans, but he also reveals to us what God

¹³ For example, Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers No. 5, trans. T. A. Smail (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 44-45; Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in *Community, State, and Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 153, 165; Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, trans. J.W. Edwards, Rev. O. Bussey, Rev. Harold M. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 1-44; Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 50; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1955), 43-44; Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 94-108; Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Finger, *Systematic Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985); Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 108-120; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001); Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 161-198; D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 50; Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 87-88; James McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, Vols. 1-3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986-1994); Jürgen Moltmann, "Creation and Redemption," in *Creation, Christ, and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. Richard W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 120; Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 164; Moltmann, "Religion, Revolution, and the Future," in *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 22; Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Everyday Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Miroslav Volf, "Creation, Eschaton, and Social Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1995): 135; Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper, 1962), 140; William Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 147.

desires in the social-cultural realm. The focus is thus kingdom ethics, not creational ethics. Consequently, many who hold this view generally look to Jesus for their view of culture and social ethics.

Whereas the previous approach emphasizes creation and downplays the fall, this view emphasizes the fall and downplays creation. Human sin is so severe that we can only know God and God's will for human cultural life insofar as we look to Jesus. Often, general revelation is seen as functionally worthless.¹⁴ Although it may be true that creation is the starting point of Scripture, this position argues that Christ is its central point. For some, this merely relativizes whatever might be said about creation apart from Christ. For others in this camp, any attempt to articulate truth claims about the nature of reality, creation, or culture apart from Christ amounts to a sub-Christian natural theology.

This approach also has its strengths: it takes sin seriously while avoiding modern optimism about human nature, and it takes Jesus seriously by echoing the New Testament call to be conformed to the image of Christ. Some with this approach focus on the humanity and historical-cultural context of Jesus, thereby emphasizing that how Jesus lived within his own context sheds light on how we ought to live in ours.

But this approach also has weaknesses. Often, there is little or no account of how Christ relates to creation, to the original good order that God established, and to the

¹⁴ As Helmut Thielicke states, "Where and how can I recognize this order of creation? From what authoritative source is it to be deduced? Is it to be read off from the world as it was originally, before the fall—for it was undoubtedly present there, present and intact—or is it to be read off from *this aeon*, in which, to put it mildly, it has undergone some disruption? Is it really so plain and accessible in this aeon? And if it is, can we from this general order casuistically deduce directives for specific situations here and now?" Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:393.

creation mandate of Genesis 1.¹⁵ In addition, some in this camp risk portraying Jesus as not merely different from or complementary to God's will in creation, but at odds with it.¹⁶ Discontinuity is thus emphasized over continuity, and Jesus or the new creation is emphasized over creation. Biblically and theologically, this approach falls short insofar as it fails to make clear the connections between creation and Christ. In the end, it needs a better account of how creation is related to Christ and culture.

In sum, creation and Christ ought to cohere in our theology of culture. As Oliver O'Donovan states, "A kingdom ethics which was set up in opposition to creation could not possibly be interested in the same eschatological kingdom as that which the New Testament proclaims. At its root there would have to be a hidden dualism which interpreted the progress of history to its completion not as a fulfillment, but as a denial of its beginnings."¹⁷ Crucially, this dualism would be not only an ethical dualism, but a theo-logical dualism, dividing the persons of the Trinity against one another. Despite the temptation to emphasize Christ at the expense of creation, or creation at the expense of Christ, a careful and consistent theology will articulate the relationship between these two and show how they, taken together with the Spirit's work in redemption, inform a truly Trinitarian theology of culture.

¹⁵ For example, though it may be outside their scope, Stassen and Gushee do not make clear how, if at all, the kingdom ethics of Jesus are related to creational ethics.

¹⁶ Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics*, 87-88; Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 147.

¹⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 15.

Survey of Scholarship

Given the persistent focus on Jesus in his writings, John Howard Yoder is often accused of dualistically separating Christ and creation rather than holistically integrating them, a mistake that is said to expose his problematic views of the Trinity, creation, and culture. Yoder himself sometimes contributes to the perception of dualism by criticizing certain theological uses and abuses of terms such as creation, creation orders, natural law, and nature.¹⁸ Notably, these references almost always come in passing remarks rather than in a sustained treatment of the issue. As a result, several scholars raise questions about whether Yoder's view of creation is deficient or simply absent.¹⁹ Richard Mouw, for instance, points out that Anabaptists generally emphasize discipleship as following Jesus but do not usually show how that is related to humanity's original creational

¹⁸ For example, see Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992; reprint, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001 [page references are to the 2001 reprint]), vii-viii, 26, 76; "Christ, the Light of the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 183-184; *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 66-68, 235; "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 141; "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 41, 43-44; "The Kingdom as Social Ethic," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 84; "The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 45; "The Otherness of the Church," in *Royal Priesthood*, 60; *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [page references are to the 1994 edition), 99, 100, 144, 190, 193, 226; *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 359; "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation," in *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 84, 89; "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," in *Royal Priesthood*, 371; "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," in *Royal Priesthood*, 110, 113-114, 123.

¹⁹ These include Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in *Evangelicals in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law,"; Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures,"; Mouw, "Creational Politics"; A. James Reimer, "'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," 245-273; Gerald Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as an Augustinian Interlocutor," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 221-244.

calling.²⁰ Mouw raises the question of how and whether the politics of Jesus stands in continuity with the politics of creation, then does not find Yoder explicitly answering this question. Similarly, Hauerwas notes that Yoder never systematically or extensively explores the question of natural theology. According to Hauerwas, the reason is simple: no one ever asked him to.²¹ Yoder was a task theologian who almost always wrote to address topics or problems assigned to him by others.

Less sympathetic readers also criticize Yoder's views (or lack thereof) on creation, culture, and the Trinity. J. Budziszewski contends that Yoder's theology suffers from convoluted matters relating to creation, creation orders, creational structures, and natural law.²² According to Budziszewski, the root problem is a lack of attention to providence, by which Budziszewski means the continuity that is inherent in God's good creation. The fall mars, but does not eradicate, the faithfulness of God and the goodness of creational structures. Budziszewski accuses Yoder of failing to realize that redemption must be the redemption *of creation*.²³ In the process of avoiding liberal Protestant optimism about the created order, Yoder "insulates" himself from the reality of creation.²⁴ Budziszewski concludes that Yoder's inordinate focus on Christ without creation leads to an imbalanced theology.

²⁰ Mouw, "Creational Politics," 191.

²¹ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 219.

²² Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," 92, 104, 106, 116.

²³ Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," 105.

²⁴ Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," 116.

In a similar vein, J. Daryl Charles argues that Yoder sees an emphasis on reason and natural law as a Stoic invasion of the Christian tradition.²⁵ According to Charles, Yoder argues that Christian ethics is not located in human nature, rational notions of justice, or the common good, but in radical obedience to Jesus. For Yoder, the political powers are always and irrevocably fallen. Yoder's fundamental flaw, on Charles's reading, is that he pits nature and grace against one another. In contrast, Charles holds that affirming natural law is necessary for any Christian moral apologetic to the wider society and any Christian attempt to contribute to society.²⁶ Charles thus argues that Yoder should submit to the collective wisdom and history of the Christian tradition on this point.²⁷

A. James Reimer contends that Yoder has a "Marcion-like Christocentrism" that cannot provide a positive theory of law and institutions that are grounded in creation.²⁸ Reimer suggests that Yoder needs a Trinitarian understanding of God and reality. By this, Reimer means more continuity between the creation of all things by God, the redemption accomplished in Christ, and the reconciliation that is being accomplished by the Spirit.²⁹

²⁵ Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," 36.

²⁶ Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," 37.

²⁷ Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," 36.

²⁸ Reimer, "A Positive Theology of Law," 251, 256.

²⁹ Reimer, "A Positive Theology of Law," 249.

Reimer argues that this is needed in order to account for how Christians can both contribute to and receive from the common good.³⁰

Nigel Goring Wright criticizes Yoder on two counts.³¹ First, Wright argues that Yoder's Christology needs to be placed within a larger Trinitarian framework. Wright does not find fault with Yoder's Christology *per se*, but contends that it needs to be better integrated with a Trinitarian framework. According to Wright, this may be blamed partially on Yoder's aversion to metaphysical and ontological modes of discourse. Second, just as Yoder focuses on the Son at the expense of the Father and Spirit, so he focuses on redemption at the expense of creation. Yoder is therefore concerned with discipleship but does not see the incarnation as a basis for something like Bonhoeffer's "new worldliness," Wright contends.³² This shortcoming in Yoder's work needs to be addressed.

Guenther Haas faults Yoder on three points. First, he argues that Yoder rejects any notion of common grace or general revelation in the fallen world.³³ Second, he sees Yoder's doctrine of the Powers as dialectical because the Powers are simultaneously necessary and evil.³⁴ Because this does not take seriously the biblical sequence of creation and fall, Haas charges Yoder with a deficient view of creation. Third, Haas argues that Yoder sees at least one sphere of creation as unable to be redeemed: the

³⁰ Reimer, "A Positive Theology of Law," 259.

³¹ Wright, *Disavowing Constantine*, 163-166.

³² Wright, *Disavowing Constantine*, 164.

³³ Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures," 117.

³⁴ Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures," 116.

state.³⁵ This is unacceptable insofar as it appears to grant that sin has permanently overtaken some sphere of God's creation.

Finally, Gerald Schlabach contends that Yoder needs a more robust theology of creation, one akin to that of Augustine.³⁶ Schlabach sees Yoder as renouncing the principles of natural law that are inherent to human nature and social life, but also affirming some kind of vague way in which the gospel affects human life and culture in general, although Schlabach believes that Yoder never spells out exactly what he means. Schlabach argues that to satisfy basic questions of logic and coherence, Yoder needs a theology of creation. According to Schlabach, this is no small task, for "any development of Yoder's insight that the cross runs 'with the grain of the universe' must offer a theology of creation as robust as Augustine's own."³⁷ Schlabach rightly notes without this theology of creation that Yoder's critics will be unconvinced and will continue to look to some form of natural law to ameliorate the perceived deficiencies in Yoder.³⁸

The negative evaluations of Yoder often proceed according to the following logic, beginning with his pacifism and rippling outward. First, Yoder sees Jesus as normative and as pacifist and is therefore himself a pacifist. Because Yoder argues that Christians should not wield the sword, he thereby rejects the validity of the state. But the state is an institution grounded in creation and necessary for human culture. Therefore, Yoder's

³⁵ Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures," 117.

³⁶ Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 235. Schlabach references *Christian Witness to the State*, 32, 33, 40.

³⁷ Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 235.

³⁸ Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 243, n. 59.

rejection of the sword entails a rejection of the state, which is taken as a rejection of culture and the goodness of God's original creation. Because God is Creator, to deny the state as part of God's activity as Creator and Sustainer is to posit a sharp disjunction between God as Creator (Father) and God as Redeemer (Son). Yoder's pacifism therefore entails a Marcionite Christology, a functional denial of the Trinity, a disjunction between nature and grace, and a rejection of the fundamental goodness of creation.

There is a further ramification: Yoder's theology is accused of being "sectarian," not "public" theology. Yoder cannot talk to non-Christians and be understood because he focuses too much on Jesus. Several of Yoder's critics argue that in order to speak about the common good or contribute to it in a meaningful way, Christians need to find common ground with non-Christians which, by definition, cannot be Jesus. That common ground must be bigger and broader than Jesus. Several suggestions are made as to what that common ground is: natural law, creation, and/or a doctrine of the Trinity. Whereas the particularity of Jesus is an obstacle to intelligibility, these broader platforms allow Christians to say things in terms that everyone can understand and to function with a rationale for cultural involvement that goes beyond Jesus. Because Yoder centers on Jesus, he can do no more than preach to the choir.

If correct, these scholars are right to see a deficiency in Yoder's theology that needs to be taken seriously. A theology without a biblical doctrine of creation and the Trinity is deficient. Although I engage the criticisms of Yoder more fully in later chapters, it suffices at this juncture to note that there are methodological reasons to suggest that this aspect of Yoder's thought demands further attention. Just as Yoder often

refers to creation and its connection to Christ and culture briefly and in passing, so Yoder's critics offer brief and passing criticisms. To accurately assess Yoder's thought, a more sustained treatment of his whole theology is needed. This dissertation is the first attempt to explicitly outline and systematically assess the relationship between Yoder's thought on Christ, creation, and culture, and to argue that together they comprise a Trinitarian theology of culture.³⁹

Method of Investigation

The occasional nature of Yoder's work complicates the task of evaluating his thought. Despite Yoder's occasional method of writing, I employ a systematic method of description and analysis to explore the relationship between various facets of Yoder's thought. Some would say it is not legitimate to analyze Yoder's thought in a systematic way, since Yoder was a vocal critic of "systems" of theology. For example, Harry Heubner asserts that "just as Yoder rejects the notion of a fundamental starting point derived from the work of abstract reasoning, so he rejects the ultimate unification of all

³⁹ Several authors point to Yoder's critique of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, including Craig Carter, "The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder's Critique of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (2003): 387-401; Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2000); Bruce L. Guenther, "The 'Enduring Problem' of Christ and Culture," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (2005): 215-227; D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008); George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* (Fall 1999), accessed online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=517>, June 20, 2008; A. James Reimer, "Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16 (Spring 1998): 5-15; Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988); Stephen B. Wilson, "Christ and Cult(ure): Some Preliminary Reflections on Liturgy and Life," *Liturgical Ministry* 12 (Fall 2003): 177-187. None of these scholars, however, undertake the systematic task of this dissertation.

knowledge.”⁴⁰ In Heubner’s view, Yoder repudiates any system and affirms fragmentary knowledge and paradox.⁴¹

However one takes Heubner’s claims, Yoder saw the need for clarity, order, logic, unity, and coherence in theology. As Carter points out, “even though Yoder himself rejected the shaping of his thought into a system, he was nevertheless a very logical and systematic thinker.”⁴² Biographically, Zimmerman points out that Yoder wanted to focus his doctoral work on constructive Anabaptist theology, but it was impossible to find a theologian in a European university who would allow him to do so.⁴³ In order to focus on Anabaptist theology, he had to do historical research. Moreover, Michael Cartwright argues that because Yoder often wears many hats—including theologian, ethicist, historian, denominational agency executive, missiologist, critic of the just war tradition, and “Bible lecturer”—the “inner unity” of Yoder’s work is not often recognized.⁴⁴ Cartwright goes on to note that the essays contained in *The Royal Priesthood*, which span from 1954 to 1990, “demonstrate the substantial unity of Yoder’s work in the past four decades.”⁴⁵ So, although Yoder resists the exaltation of system or “methodologism” to the point where it determines all else in theology, it would be a mistake not to assess the

⁴⁰ Heubner, “The Christian Life as Gift and Patience: Why Yoder Has Trouble with Method,” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 27.

⁴¹ See also Chris K. Heubner, “Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2002): 49-62, esp. 53-55.

⁴² Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 18.

⁴³ Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 141.

⁴⁴ Cartwright, “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity,” in *Royal Priesthood*, 3.

⁴⁵ Cartwright, “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity,” in *Royal Priesthood*, 3.

logic, unity, and interrelation of his thought. Yoder himself explicitly affirms the natural need and inevitability of systematic theology as “attention to coherence, system, and organization,” as well as the “inter-relations” of thought patterns.⁴⁶ Yoder often does not receive a fair hearing from more systematically-inclined theologians in part because he never did for them what he did for others, namely, strategically package his thought for the purposes of dialogue without assuming that one particular packaging is the only or best way to do theology. There is thus a good Yoderian reason why I am justified in assessing his thought systematically—to further the dialogue among systematic theologians—so long as I avoid the presumption that systematic theology is the best or the only way to do theology.⁴⁷

Since Yoder was less concerned about producing systematic works than speaking to specific, contextual situations and conversation partners, the very nature of his work calls for attention to the historical contexts and rhetorical situations in which they took place.⁴⁸ Because of this, I draw attention to context at key points in my argument where it makes a difference in reading Yoder correctly. At the same time, I also make explicit the systematic connections between various aspects of Yoder’s thought that were left only implicitly connected by the original author.

⁴⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 230.

⁴⁷ For further comments on the interconnectedness of Yoder’s thoughts, see Finger, “Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics?” 320; Hauerwas, “Lingering with Yoder’s Wild Work,” 13; and Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 189.

⁴⁸ As Carter states, “It is not possible to understand the thought of such a conversational theologian without keeping in mind who he was conversing with, reacting to, debating, and learning from while writing his essays.” Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 19, n. 15.

The scope of this dissertation is limited to the nexus of Christ, creation, and culture, which comprises Yoder's Trinitarian theology of culture. These topics are not explored exhaustively, but only insofar as they relate to each other. Since a variety of themes are interwoven in Yoder's work, it is inevitable that additional topics will factor into the discussion. However, this dissertation will explore those additional topics only when they provide insight with respect to its more focused topic.

Terminology

Culture

Raymond Williams has noted that the term 'culture' is notoriously difficult to define, calling it "one of the two or three most complicated in the English language."⁴⁹ Its usage in a wide variety of disciplines and contexts makes it both ubiquitous and ambiguous.⁵⁰ For my purposes, H. Richard Niebuhr's definition of culture in *Christ and Culture* is relevant, given that text's position in the last sixty years of Christian theology and social ethics and given Yoder's interaction with Niebuhr's framework. Although H. Richard Niebuhr and Yoder differ in their theologies of culture, they agree on the broad, empirical practices that constitute culture. Niebuhr draws from three different articles on "Culture" and "Civilization" in order to produce his own definition of culture as "that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech. Culture is the

⁴⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76.

⁵⁰ For a historical survey of its use and its function in modern times, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), Chapters 1-2.

artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”⁵¹ Given this sweeping definition, it is apparent that culture is an umbrella that includes virtually any human activity. Niebuhr gives examples of cultural activity, such as speech, education, tradition, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, inventions, and technologies.⁵² Niebuhr continues his discussion by describing culture as inherently social and involving human achievements which are designed to meet ends based on certain values. Moreover, these values are always realized in temporal and material ways, thanks to human finitude. Finally, culture is pluralistic in that differences in gender, age, economic status, and political status cause conflict; society itself is always undergoing the strain of this competition to realize divergent goods.⁵³

When Yoder uses the term “culture,” it has the same broad scope as Niebuhr’s definition. In discussing the Powers as “structures of society,” Yoder provides a list that mirrors Niebuhr’s examples of cultural activity, such that it includes “religious structures (especially the religious undergirdings of stable ancient and primitive societies), intellectual structures (-ologies and -isms), moral structures (codes and customs), [and]

⁵¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 32. The three articles cited by Niebuhr are Bronislaw Malinowski, “Culture,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. IV, ed. Edwin R. A. Selgiman (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1937), 621; James Harvey Robinson, “Civilization,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., vol. 5, 735; and Carl Brinkmann, “Civilization,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 3, 525.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 38.

political structures (the tyrant, the market, the school, the courts, race, and nation).”⁵⁴

Elsewhere, Yoder provides more concrete examples and forms of culture (some good and some bad): tyranny, pornography, cultic idolatry, economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, taxation, agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, philosophy, language, rituals, music, hospitals, service to the poor, and generalized education.⁵⁵

Given their lists, both Niebuhr and Yoder see culture as, in Herskovitz’s terms, “essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people...In the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think.”⁵⁶ Thus, although Niebuhr and Yoder present different theological definitions of culture, when it comes to defining concrete manifestations of culture, both Yoder and Niebuhr conceive of culture as a broad term that refers to basic patterns and practices of human life.

Beyond the question of what counts as culture or manifestations of culture, there remains the question of how one theologically articulates the nature and task of culture, especially in relation to certain loci, such as doctrines of Christ and creation. Although the question of culture is not solely the provenance of theology, I begin with the assumption that culture is something that can and should be accounted for in a theological way. The task of doing so is a key part of what Yoder addresses—not so much whether practices should be counted as culture or not (on the definitions noted above, it is hard to

⁵⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 142-3.

⁵⁵ Yoder, “Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” 69.

⁵⁶ Melville J. Herskovitz, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 625. While Herskovitz’s sociological analysis is helpful, I do not mean to imply that religion is completely reducible to an immanentized function and product of culture, as some anthropologists would argue.

conceive of an activity that would be entirely outside the scope of culture), but how Christians ought theologically to conceive of the cultural task and how Christian theology and social ethics ought to provide guidance on how Christians participate in or abstain from certain cultural practices. Given the interconnection of various doctrines, and of theology and ethics, how one addresses culture affects and is affected by a variety of factors. These interconnections are what I seek to explore in Yoder's thought.

Creation

As with "culture," the term "creation" has a number of distinct but related aspects. For clarity's sake, it is necessary to outline briefly some of those aspects. First, creation can be taken as similar to terms like "reality," "cosmos," "world," or "nature." This scope of meaning is quite broad, as the referent is to all that is not God. This term generally suggests a theistic worldview, although it need not do so.⁵⁷ Second, creation can refer more narrowly to nature, taken as the whole biophysical reality of the world. As part of that world, we could focus on theological anthropology that begins from God's creation of human beings in God's image. The focus here is on human nature as defined in relation to God as Creator. Third, creation can connote God's creative and providential act of providing for life to continue as often represented through stability and continuity in the biophysical regularities of the universe from the orbits of the planets to the involuntary functions of the human body. But the regular ordered patterns of life are not merely biophysical. Creation can thus refer, fourthly, to those social-cultural aspects of

⁵⁷ Hans Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics: The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin Gunton and Oswald Bayer* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 9.

human life, often characterized as creation orders or natural law, which contain norms that are essential to human flourishing because they enable humans to live in line with God's intentions in creating the world. Thus, an "ethic of creation" speaks to what humans ought to do as creatures that are created in the image of God who has ordered all things.

Fifth, creation can refer to the prelapsarian state of things, the first in the sequence of the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation/new creation. Within this framework, creation has two aspects. First, God creates the world *ex nihilo*, an act that is completed. Second, as Creator, God continues to sustain the world he has made. Creation is thus something that we are beyond in one sense, insofar as the history of God's dealings with the world moves forward. But in another sense, we never get beyond the enduring reality of createdness. The world is God's creation and humans are God's creatures, no matter how affected by sin. Thus, the present and future of human life can never be separated from the ongoing reality of relatedness to God as Creator. It is important therefore to emphasize both the distinctness and relatedness of creation with respect to what follows in Scripture.

As I use it in this dissertation, the term "creation" has three basic facets: ontological, moral, and epistemological. Although these facets can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Ontologically, creation refers to the whole of reality, including humanity as it exists in relation to its Creator. Morally, creation refers to the gift and call placed on human life to walk in God's ways in God's world. As creatures in relation to God, other humans, and all that God has created, we are given responsibility to love all

things in a way befitting the nature of each. Epistemologically, creation refers to the ‘book of nature,’ a realm of inquiry that allows us to make observations about reality. The very label “creation” suggests that this is not a quasi-autonomous natural theology that can be done without reference to a biblical or theological framework; to speak of “creation” at all is to assume this framework.⁵⁸ Within this framework, an epistemic appeal to creation affirms that we need not appeal to chapter and verse for every truth claim, but rather understand that Scripture provides the foundation and lens for testing truth claims.⁵⁹ Moreover, any epistemic appeal to creation recognizes the need for discernment, as human sinfulness is at work in suppression and distortion, such that it is sometimes more appropriate to speak of this type of knowledge as misinformation rather than information.⁶⁰

When I speak of the relation between Christ, creation, and culture, there are implications for all three levels. Ontologically, we need to account for how we square what we learn about being human from Jesus with what we say about what it means to be God’s creatures. Morally, we need to account for how the way of Jesus connects with what we are called to do and how we are called to be in relation to God, other humans, and the rest of created reality. Epistemologically, we need to account for how what we know from the Bible about Jesus coheres with what we know from our interpretation of

⁵⁸ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 50; cf. Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics*, 350.

⁵⁹ Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:6:1.

⁶⁰ Cf. Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation*.

the world around us, including ourselves. When I speak of creation, therefore, I intend to reference this complex interconnection of issues.

Chapter Survey

Yoder's theology cannot be understood apart from the conversations in which he was engaged. Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr were essential conversation partners for Yoder because they set the intellectual framework for mid-twentieth-century North American ethics and theology, convincing Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike that the Anabaptist position could claim faithfulness to the way of Jesus only at the cost of recognizing its irresponsibility, ineffectiveness, and irrelevance in relation to the wider culture, society, and politics. Yoder spent his life explaining why the dilemma between faithfulness and effectiveness was a false one. In chapter 2, "The Niebuhrs, Christ, Creation, and Culture," I argue that the Niebuhrs' theology of culture and social ethics are integrally linked with other key doctrinal issues, such as their explanation of creation, fall, and redemption; their doctrine of the Trinity; and their Christology. These doctrinal positions are not accidental but essential to their social ethics and theology of culture. For all these reasons, Yoder finds himself at odds with the Niebuhrs. For the same reasons, evangelical and Reformed Christians who take the Bible and classical orthodoxy seriously should be cautious about appropriating the Niebuhrs' thought, because their theology and social ethics are of a piece.

Whereas the Niebuhrs use Trinitarian language without the substance of true Trinitarian orthodoxy, Yoder's thought has the substance of true Trinitarianism. This claim may be counterintuitive, as Yoder is often thought to be indifferent to the creeds, if

not downright hostile to them. If he is, my claim that he presents a Trinitarian theology of culture would be highly suspect. In chapter 3, “God’s Word and Our Words: Yoder on the Creeds,” I argue that Yoder’s thought is compatible with the early ecumenical creeds, in particular those of Nicea and Chalcedon. To do so, I place Yoder’s understanding of the creeds within the larger context of Yoder’s theology, including his view of the nature of theological language (including the New Testament) and the authority of tradition.

Chapter 4 sets forth what I argue is Yoder’s biblically-grounded Christology, which holds that in his humanity and his divinity Jesus not only relates directly to culture, but also serves as the linchpin for creation and redemption’s coherence. Many of Yoder’s contemporaries began with certain systematic assumptions that generated questions like “How do Christ and culture relate?” or “How are creation and redemption connected?” I contend that Yoder’s exegesis helpfully shows how, as a fully human Jewish person, Jesus directly addresses culture, politics, economics, and other questions of social ethics. I also outline how Yoder rightly argues that, as fully divine, Jesus creates, sustains, and directs all things and, in him, all things hold together.

Many scholars accuse Yoder of lacking a sound doctrine of creation and thereby having a deficient theology of culture. These thinkers rightly raise the question of the relationship between Jesus and creation with all that that entails for theology and social ethics. In chapter 5, “The Power of Jesus and the Politics of Creation,” I argue that, for Yoder, the power of Jesus re-establishes the politics of creation. By moving through Yoder’s account of creation, fall, and redemption, I show that he presents an ontology of peaceful power in which humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and the

Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing. Far from neglecting creation, careful attention to Yoder's theology reveals a robust doctrine of creation that coheres with redemption.

To some, Yoder's denial that the state is rooted in creation is evidence that he has a deficient doctrine of creation, which in turn reveals problematic views of redemption and the Trinity. If the state is evil but is part of the orders of creation, then Yoder's doctrine of creation seemingly conflates creation and fall. If the state is creational but is not redeemed, then Yoder appears to concede some realm of creation to sin and the fall, thus limiting the scope of Christ's redemptive activity. If I am going to argue that creation and redemption cohere in Yoder's Trinitarian theology of culture, these questions must be addressed. In chapter 6, "From the Beginning it was not so': The Sword-Bearing State," I argue that Yoder shows that the sword-bearing state is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation. God's providential allowance for the sword must not be confused or conflated with God's creative and redemptive will.

When Yoder rejects the sword, however, his concern is to disavow fallen culture, not culture as God intends it. In fact, Yoder wants to make clear that he is not against but *for* the nations. To that end, in the last decade of his life, Yoder more intentionally connected his account of the social processes of the Christian community with his sacramentology and pneumatology, and showed how all of the above have direct relevance to a theology of culture. In chapter 7, "The Spirit Pioneering Culture," I argue that Yoder views the transformation of culture as dependent on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking of God's kingdom. When the power of creation and the

politics of Jesus are unleashed by the person of the Spirit, the public practices of the church cannot help but overflow and exert a transformative effect not only in the church but in all of human culture.

CHAPTER 2: THE NIEBUHRS, CHRIST, CREATION, AND CULTURE

Introduction

Although Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr greatly influenced twentieth-century North American theology and ethics, John Howard Yoder routinely criticizes them, arguing that their social ethics and theology of culture are skewed because of some basic theological differences with both Scripture and classical orthodoxy, including doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, creation, resurrection, and regeneration.¹ The Niebuhrs certainly offered helpful and astute commentary on a wide range of theological and ethical topics, but they did have their weaknesses—weaknesses that Yoder rightly argued should be a stumbling block for those whose theology of culture seeks to be biblical and theologically orthodox. In this chapter, I show that the Niebuhrs’ theology of culture and social ethics are integrally linked with other key doctrinal issues, such as their explanation of creation, fall, and redemption; their doctrine of the Trinity; and their Christology. These doctrinal positions are not accidental but essential to their social ethics and theology of culture. With respect to Reinhold, I argue that his anthropology

¹ Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 58-65; and *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Church Peace Mission Pamphlet No. 6 (Washington, D.C.: The Church Peace Mission, 1966), 20-22. This text was originally presented to the Seminar “Modern Theological Thought and Its Criticisms of Nonresistance,” held at Heerewegen-Zeist (Netherlands) in May, 1953. It was printed as *Heerewegen Pamphlet No. 1* in 1954; as an article in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (Apr. 1955); as a *Concern* reprint; and as cited above.

ontologizes evil into the very order of creation, that he views culture and society as a realm of inherent strife, and that the work and person of Christ terminate at the cross.²

With respect to H. Richard, I argue that he uses the term “culture” in an equivocal way, which results in a conflation of creation and fall. In addition, because he begins with Christ and culture as two fundamentally unrelated categories, his thought lacks criteria or norms for authentic transformation of culture. Finally, his Trinitarianism pits the Father, Son, and Spirit—and thereby creation and redemption—against one another, rather than showing how they properly cohere.³

² To avoid confusion, I refer to the Niebuhrs by Reinhold or H. Richard. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society ; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956); *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, vol. 1: 1941, vol. 2: 1943. Reprint, 1964); “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102-122. The definitive biography of Reinhold is Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). For commentary on Reinhold Niebuhr, see Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Ronald Feenstra, “Reassessing the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 142-160; Douglas A. Hicks, “Self-Interest, Agency, and Deprivation,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 147-167; Rachel Hadley King, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1964); Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrism,” in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 233-254; Theodore Minnema, *The Social Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1958); Bob E. Patterson, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977); Geoffrey Rees, “The Anxiety of Inheritance: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Literal Truth of Original Sin,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003): 75-99; Valerie C. Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 100-112; Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); and John Howard Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951); “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church” was originally published in *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (1946): 371-384. It was republished as “Theological Unitarianisms,” *Theology Today* 40, no. 2 (1983): 150-157. My references are to the original publication. Other significant works include *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) and *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1963). For commentary on H. Richard’s thought, see Sydney Ahlstrom, “H. Richard Niebuhr’s Place in American Thought,” *Christianity and Crisis* 23 (1963): 212-217; Craig Carter, “The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder’s Critique of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (2003): 387-401; Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A*

Because summaries of the Niebuhrs' thought are readily available, I do not assess them on that basic level. Rather, after showing how Yoder's theology responds to theirs, I critically evaluate them through the lens of the biblical and theological distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption.⁴ It is crucial to see how the Niebuhrs use these terms. I show that both Niebuhrs conflate creation and fall, as well as set creation and redemption against one another. For those who see these categories primarily as dialectic, existential categories, this will not be embarrassing or problematic. Yet, for evangelical and Reformed thinkers who take these categories to be distinct "acts" in the biblical narrative and thereby distinguish creational structure and fallen direction, this raises grave doubts about whether one can naively appropriate the Niebuhrs' thought in a

Post-Christendom Perspective (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper, 1957); Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000); Edward Clinton Gardner, "Ethical Issues for the 1970's: A Critique of Christocentric Models of Ethical Analysis," *Religion in Life* 39 (1970):205-220; Libertus A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970); Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983); Lonnie D. Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *The Journal of Religion* 50:1 (1970): 33-57; Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977); D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, Church, and Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008); George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* (Fall 1999): 4-15, accessed online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=517>, June 20, 2008; Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003); Glen Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 127-190; William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002); Stephen B. Wilson, "Christ and Cult(ure): Some Preliminary Reflections on Liturgy and Life," *Liturgical Ministry* 12 (Fall 2003): 177-187; Michael Wittmer, "Analysis and Critique of 'Christ the Transformer of Culture,'" (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2000); and Yoder, "A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 30-91.

⁴ This lens is utilized by several authors, including Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984); Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

theology of culture. Given the extent to which Yoder aimed to undermine some of the Niebuhrs' central premises, we must attend to the way that his theology of culture addresses the same doctrinal issues. Though I postpone such attention to future chapters, the need to clarify Yoder's own theology of culture provides the impetus and establishes the necessity for this chapter.

Yoder's Theology as Response to the Niebuhrs

Yoder's theology and ethics are a response to Reinhold Niebuhr's charge that, as Gerald Schlabach puts it, "Christians who embrace the nonviolent ethic of Jesus get Jesus right, but they at the same time render themselves politically irrelevant and socially irresponsible."⁵ As Schlabach notes, Yoder's engagement with Reinhold and his legatees "run[s] like a thread throughout his career."⁶ Yoder's project is indeed driven in part by his attempt to dismantle how both Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr influenced Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike. In doing so, Yoder did not merely try to make Mennonites more respectable in ecumenical circles, but he argued that his alternative to the Niebuhrs' theology and ethics was more ecumenical insofar as it appealed to both Scripture and orthodox Christian teaching for its conclusions.

⁵ Gerald Schlabach, "John H. Yoder as Augustinian Interlocutor: The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 228.

⁶ Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 239, n. 24.

Yoder's response to Reinhold is seen throughout his works. In 1955, Yoder's second published scholarly essay outlines Reinhold's thought on pacifism.⁷ Yoder raises several critical questions that become sounding points throughout his ethics, including the definition of terms such as "impossibility," "necessity," and "responsibility." Yoder also highlights points of theological difference with Reinhold's thought, including the reality of the resurrection, the importance of the church, the difference regeneration makes for ethics, and the role of the Holy Spirit in ethics.

In 1964, when Yoder sets up the problem he means to address in *The Christian Witness to the State*, it is clear that the debate is framed by Reinhold. After noting the optimistic pacifism of liberal Christianity in the 1920's and 30's, Yoder points out that three decades later, that optimism had been proved mistaken on both biblical and empirical grounds.⁸ The debate has been reconfigured by Reinhold to create a quandary: the consistent Christian is called to renounce lethal violence, but social order is only possible on the basis of violence and coercion. As a result, the Christian pacifist is patronized as a "prophetic minority" and accused of being politically and socially irrelevant. Those bold enough to get their hands dirty with the responsibility of politics, however, are purportedly the ones who really understand the human condition. Though Christ demands the rejection of violence, this is impossible for the Christian who is

⁷ Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (Apr. 1955): 101-117. For chronology of Yoder's publications, see Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997); see also Nation, "Supplement to *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder*," in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Heubner, Harry J. Heubner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 472-491.

⁸ Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 5-8.

honest about his or her responsibilities in the world. Yoder thus frames the argument of this book largely in response to Reinhold.⁹

In 1972, the *Politics of Jesus* responds to what Yoder saw as problematic in Reinhold's thought. He gives six reasons why "mainstream ethics" dismisses Jesus' relevance and normativity for social ethics. Of the six reasons enumerated in *Politics of Jesus*, three are explicitly linked to Reinhold in *Christian Attitudes*,¹⁰ and two more may also be linked to him.¹¹

Lastly, Yoder's narrative of twentieth century thought in *Christian Attitudes* makes clear that his work is a direct response to Reinhold Niebuhr. Yoder begins with the liberal pacifism of the first decades of the twentieth century and then shows how two World Wars and Reinhold's thought demolished the foundations of that pacifism. Many North American Mennonites accepted Reinhold's dichotomy between faithfulness and effectiveness. According to Yoder, this dichotomy reinforced the tendency of some Mennonites towards a dualism and separatism for the sake of "faithfulness," while

⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 7, n. 4. When providing charts illustrating different positions concerning the relationship between church and state, Yoder assigns Reinhold his own diagram alongside that of medieval Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Amish positions. Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 66.

¹⁰ Those three reasons for setting aside Jesus are that (1) Jesus intended his ethic for a brief "interim," (2) Jesus was focused on individual relationships and had nothing of substance to say to questions of power, institutions, and structures of society, and (3) Jesus did not have the responsibilities and control in society that later Christians have. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5-6; and *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2009), 294-295.

¹¹ Those other two reasons are that (1) Jesus' message was ahistorical and focused on the self in relation to God, not social or moral change (cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 45, 55) and (2) a focus on the doctrine of Jesus' death, including justification and atonement, which pays no attention to his life. Although many theologians emphasize justification and atonement, these two are key symbols for Reinhold's emphasis on grace as pardon rather than grace as empowerment in *Nature and Destiny of Man* (e.g., 2:148-156, 212).

allowing others to claim that their accommodation to the surrounding culture was for the sake of “effectiveness.” Thus, Yoder argues that the position of mid-twentieth century Mennonites was “not learned so much from four centuries of minority history as from accommodation to Reinhold Niebuhr.”¹² The problem, for Yoder, was not that Reinhold was attacking the Mennonites’ settled position. Rather, he was framing the issues in a way that perpetuated the problems Yoder saw in his own tradition: a neo-Constantinian insularity that is indirectly conservative toward the wider society’s status quo and an uncritical accommodation that loses Christian specificity.¹³ Crucially, Yoder differed with Reinhold not merely on issues of pacifism. He notes, for instance, that the difference between Reinhold and the “Jesus of the New Testament witness” was a “specimen of total theological encounter” in which two different paradigms collide.¹⁴

Though Yoder spent more time on Reinhold, perhaps because his thought loomed larger at the time, he also engaged H. Richard. One major concern is that in *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard positions Mennonites as faithful but irrelevant, at best, and as inconsistent and naïve, at worst. Yoder addresses the problematic working assumptions of this work in an essay written in 1958.¹⁵ Though not immediately published, it

¹² Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 297.

¹³ See Yoder, “Christ, the Hope of the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 195-197, for a taxonomy of neo-Constantinianisms.

¹⁴ Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 317-318.

¹⁵ Stassen, Yeager, and Yoder, “Preface,” in *Authentic Transformation*, 11.

circulated among interested parties for almost forty years before being printed in 1996.¹⁶ That it could be published so long after its composition reveals that H. Richard's analysis and typology had gone largely unquestioned in the intervening decades. In the years following the publication of Yoder's essay, criticisms of H. Richard have blossomed and almost all of them substantially echo Yoder.

Yoder also addresses H. Richard in the opening chapter of *Politics* although he does not figure as prominently as Reinhold. Yoder notes that some thinkers set Jesus aside in social ethics because he was a radical monotheist who pointed people away from "local and finite values" to God, a move that provides critical leverage against any particular ethic claiming to know God's will.¹⁷ This is the Jesus of H. Richard's *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* and *Christ and Culture*.¹⁸ Thus, Yoder's argument in *Politics* is as relevant to H. Richard's Christology as it is to Reinhold's.

Yoder's later work can also be seen as a response to H. Richard, most notably Yoder's essay "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture" and his book *Body Politics*. In these works, he provides an account of authentic transformation, which is not only grounded in Christ and embodied in the church, but also communicable and intelligible to the watching world. Yoder thus attempts to flesh out a position that H. Richard ultimately rejects—not the "Christ against culture" type, but that of the Gospel of John. According to H. Richard, the Gospel of John presents the position that "the

¹⁶ Yoder, "A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 31-90.

¹⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 7.

¹⁸ E.g., H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 3, 28. Cf. Wittmer's contention that radical monotheism is the controlling theme of H. Richard's thought. Wittmer, "Analysis and Critique of 'Christ the Transformer of Culture,'" 262.

Christian life is cultural life converted by the regeneration of man's spirit...[The Apostle John] has combined the conversionist *motif* with the separatism of the Christ-against-culture school of thought."¹⁹ Whereas H. Richard discounts this position because the Apostle is not a soteriological universalist, Yoder takes up John's mantle to argue that in its conformity to Christ, the Christian community presents a way of being cultural that stands against or separate from the fallenness of the world but moves with the ultimate creational grain of the universe.

In addition to the specific places where Yoder references and addresses the Niebuhrs, his wider project serves to counteract their basic assumptions. Although more could be cited, two examples should suffice to illustrate this. First, Yoder emphasizes Jeremiah's injunction to "seek the peace of the city where you dwell" as a way to get beyond the Niebuhrs' dichotomy between faithfulness and effectiveness/responsibility. Jeremiah's command provides a biblical basis for getting beyond this false dilemma. The existence of God's people is about *both* being a peculiar people *and* seeking the welfare of one's locale. These are not inherently opposed.

Second, in contradistinction to Stanley Hauerwas, Yoder titled his last book of collected essays "*For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical*" so as to highlight his conviction that to be a witness to the good news of Jesus does not render oneself unintelligible to the larger world. This title is a direct rejoinder to Hauerwas's *Against the Nations*. Yoder set himself over against his good friend perhaps in part because he feared that Hauerwas was unwittingly reaffirming rather than deconstructing the Niebuhrs'

¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 205.

faithfulness-effectiveness dichotomy, thereby working against Yoder's efforts for decades to change both Mennonite self-understanding and how the Anabaptist position was routinely characterized by others. Ultimately, Yoder's response to the Niebuhrs is justified because, on close evaluation, their theology of culture involves less than biblical, orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and Christ, as well as a conflation of creation and fall.

Reinhold Niebuhr: The Fall into Creation

Reinhold's interpretation of creation, fall, and redemption are shaped by his views of the nature of biblical and theological language. For Reinhold, biblical symbols ought to be taken seriously, but not literally.²⁰ By biblical symbols, Reinhold means things such as creation, fall, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and eschaton. He contends that when taken literally, these symbols destroy the dialectic between history and eternity, which he regards as the mistake of orthodoxy. But if the symbols are not taken seriously, the concept of an eternity that fulfills rather than destroys history is lost, which he regards as the mistake of modern liberal Christianity. Reinhold sees himself as charting a middle way between these two: biblical language is true when taken symbolically and false when taken literally.

What should we make of Reinhold's view? As Langdon Gilkey points out, Reinhold is neo-orthodox. He is similar to orthodoxy because he uses the same central words as the classical biblical, Pauline, Augustinian, Reformation tradition, words such as creation, fall, revelation, incarnation/atonement, and grace. Reinhold does not set these symbols aside in favor of something else (as with liberal theology), but sees these

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:50

symbols as mediating something true about human reality and experience. This is why many liberal theologians and secularists alike disdained his theology.²¹ Because Reinhold uses the words of Scripture and classical theology, he is *neo-orthodox*. But with respect to the meaning of those words, Reinhold differs with Scripture and classical theology. Gilkey notes that modernity affected Reinhold such that the secular materials present in his thought “transmute the traditional theological doctrines from their frequently literalistic and objectivistic meanings into a modern symbolic and existential understanding.”²² Because Reinhold gives different content to the language of Scripture and classical theology, he is *neo-orthodox*. Gilkey brings further clarity to this point, noting that for the writers of Scripture and most theologians, events such as creation, the fall, and Jesus’ resurrection were taken as “representing *both* particular historical events *and* events of transcendent significance for the rest of history, and in that sense they are theologically symbolic.”²³ Reinhold, along with many modern theologians, rejects the former but attempts to embrace the latter.²⁴ This pattern of interpretation is seen in *The*

²¹ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 226.

²² Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 79. In discussing Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr, John Dewey says he has the impression that both thinkers “have completely lost faith in traditional statements of Christianity, haven’t got any modern substitute and so are making up, off the bat, something which supplies to them the gist of Christianity—what they find significant in it and what they approve of in modern thought—as when two newspapers are joined. The new organ says ‘retaining the best features of both.’” Quoted in Daniel Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), 86-87.

²³ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 135.

²⁴ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 135-136.

Nature and Destiny of Man.²⁵ This work provides the anthropological lens through which I engage Reinhold's view of Christ, creation, and culture.

The Fall into Creation

Expressed in mythical or supra-rational terms, God is Creator. The Bible retains primitive myths of God shaping the world because these myths contain within them the reality of God's transcendence and freedom, as well as his relation to the good creation and history.²⁶ Although creation is other than God, it is not evil by virtue of its otherness.²⁷ Because God is Creator, the world as a whole reveals God's majesty and power.²⁸ The nature of humanity, however, reveals a dark side to Reinhold's Creator God. Rather than seeing the sin and fall as a perversion or corruption of humanity's nature, Reinhold explains creation and fall in such a way that humanity is inevitably sinful because of what we are as nature and spirit.²⁹ As Gilkey points out, Reinhold seems unaware that this view portrays sin as an "ontological necessity" in which "the results of the fall are the consequences of creation."³⁰

²⁵ I focus on this work because Reinhold provides a thorough and systematic overview of his theological anthropology, which is intimately connected to his views on a variety of other subjects.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:133.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:127, 133-134.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:132.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:182, 2:73. Reinhold distinguishes between sinning "inevitably" and sinning "necessarily." He affirms the former but not the latter. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:250-251.

³⁰ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 133 n. 7.

As Reinhold never tires of reiterating, there are two basic facets that comprise the nature of humanity.³¹ On the one hand, we are children of nature, finite and limited by the reality of our organic life. As such, we are subject to the vagaries of history and the necessities of our bodily impulses. On the other hand, we are spirits who transcend both nature and our own life and reason.³² As spirit, the human is self-transcendent. We can see beyond our natural limits and perceive that our essence is free self-determination.³³ The human condition is defined by the fact that humanity “stands at the juncture of nature and spirit.”³⁴

Reinhold translates Genesis 1-3 into a phenomenological description of the moral life. The truth that the doctrine of original sin is meant to convey, for Reinhold, is the paradox of the inevitability of sin and the individual’s responsibility for sin.³⁵ If original sin is thought to be an inherited second nature, he does not see how each individual can truly be held responsible for their sin. Therefore, he seeks to avoid this conundrum by avoiding the “literalistic errors” that plague this interpretation of Scripture. As a result, he denies that the perfection from which humanity fell can be located prior to the fall.³⁶ Humanity never was, in actuality, in right relation to God, other humans, and the rest of the created order. The locus of original righteousness is not in humanity’s original,

³¹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:78, 145, 163.

³² Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:3.

³³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:16.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:17. Cf. 1:270.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:262.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:268.

uncorrupted nature before the fall, but in each individual.³⁷ In the individual's self-transcendence, the memory and consciousness of original perfection arise. That is, "original perfection" is how Reinhold describes the realization that the self is capable of "free self-determination,"³⁸ which is the essence of humanity. So the "memory" of original perfection is a way to talk about the perpetual need to judge and criticize one's past and future self. To say "original righteousness" is to say "I always could have done better" as I judge my particular actions. Original righteousness is relevant not as a *past* description of something lost or something to be restored in the *future* but as a *present* phenomenological description of the moral self.

For Reinhold, the fall is not an event in history but "a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man."³⁹ Thus, "perfection before the Fall is, in other words, perfection before the act."⁴⁰ To act in history and creation is to fall. Adam's "sinlessness...preceded his first significant action and his sinfulness came to light in that action. This is a symbol for the whole of human history. The original righteousness of man stands, as it were, outside of history."⁴¹ Although we ought to accept our finiteness, we are unable to do so because our freedom and transcendence produce anxiety that leads to sin.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:277.

³⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:16.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:269.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:278.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:280.

Anxiety explains the origin of sin. Sin is occasioned by the paradox of being human. Because we are both nature and spirit, our anxiety works in a two-fold manner.⁴² On the one hand, because we are free (as spirit) to determine ourselves, we know that we have great potential and we are compelled by anxiety to be creative in maximizing that potential. On the other hand, this same anxiety causes us to delude ourselves into thinking that our limited knowledge and perspective is the unlimited Absolute. The creative and destructive aspects of anxiety cannot be untangled.⁴³ The conditions for the possibility of a great and glorious end are simultaneously the conditions for the possibility of an ignominious and inglorious demise. These two possibilities become actual in every human being. The state of anxiety thus leads inevitably to sin.⁴⁴

Original sin describes the inevitability of sin and the responsibility of the self-transcending individual, who is culpable for his failure to be what he ought to be.⁴⁵ Reinhold repudiates Augustine and Calvin's historical and overly literal view of original sin, arguing instead that original sin is a dialectical, existential truth that points to the inevitability of humanity's self-love and self-centeredness.⁴⁶ Because the freedom of the self stands "outside all relations," the real essence of sin is the soul's relation to God, not

⁴² Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:178-180. Niebuhr's concept of anxiety follows Kierkegaard. Niebuhr points to Kierkegaard as having "the most profound analysis of the relation of sin and anxiety in Christian thought" (1:182, n. 2).

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:186.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:73.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:254.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:260.

in any social relations.⁴⁷ Original sin is thus primarily a psychological description of the individual's relation to God and an account of why each individual inevitably, but not necessarily, sins.⁴⁸ The reality of original sin "is true in every moment of history, but it has no history."⁴⁹

Reinhold's anthropology conflates creation and fall in the sense that the fall into sin is the inevitable consequence of how humanity was created, not its perversion or corruption. The fall and sin are no longer contingent in that it could have been otherwise. Instead, the fall and sin are essential to humanity in the sense that it is the natural outworking of what we are. Reinhold's declaration that neither he nor the Christian tradition confuses finitude with fallenness sounds very orthodox,⁵⁰ but that is because human nature is generally identified as finite, whereas for Reinhold, that is but one aspect of human nature. He argues that as spirit, we *transcend* our selves, nature, time, and history, and stand in direct relation to eternity. So although *finitude* does not lead inevitably to sin in Reinhold's account, *being human* does. Against the biblical view that all things were "very good" in the beginning, Reinhold's anthropology makes sin a structural necessity. The distinction between creation and fall refers simply to "qualities of existence" that are always true in the life of each individual.⁵¹ Unlike Augustine, there is no historical, contingent entry of sin into human history in a literal fall. But if sin is not

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:257.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:251.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 86.

⁵⁰ E.g., Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:137.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 86.

historical and contingent, it appears to be ontological and necessary.⁵² Reinhold's fall is not a fall *from* creation but a fall *into*, a fall *inherent in* the creation of humanity.

Therefore, his anthropology is simultaneously a theodicy. But his theodicy goes too far because it makes sin intelligible in terms of the nature of humanity.⁵³

Reinhold's conflation of creation and fall affects his view of sanctification and eschatological glorification.⁵⁴ He criticizes both Augustine and Calvin for their views on sanctification. The central issue, he declares, is whether "man's historical existence" is such that a person can ever have an easy conscience.⁵⁵ If someone can, "it means that it is possible for a will centred in an individual ego to be brought into essential conformity with the will and power which governs all things."⁵⁶ But this, thinks Reinhold, is the impossible possibility—something to shoot for, but something that can never in fact happen. We may pray, "Thy will be done," but we know we will never do it. Why? He does not say because of humanity's *sinful* existence, but because of humanity's *historical* existence. The problem is ontological. Sanctification is an impossible possibility in Reinhold's theology because the ontology of his anthropology does not permit it. Just to the extent that Reinhold cannot acknowledge an original righteousness in time and space,

⁵² Cf. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 133 n. 7.

⁵³ Cf. Minnema, *The Social Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 114.

⁵⁴ As Gilkey notes, if sin has a historical cause, it leaves open the possibility of redemption. If, however, sin is inevitable given the ontological constitution of humanity, it will inevitably affect how one conceives of "redemption." Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 133 n. 7.

⁵⁵ The pastoral difference between Niebuhr and Luther on the doctrine of justification by faith should be noted. Whereas for Luther justification by faith is a doctrine that brings comfort because we rest in Christ, for Niebuhr justification by faith is a doctrine that perpetually unsettles us.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 141.

he cannot imagine the possibility of growing in grace and truth as the Christian life progresses. We fall short not because we are sinful, but because we are not God.

Reinhold's conflation of creation and fall also presents problems for his notion of glorification. Reinhold criticizes Luther for agreeing with the Christian tradition that human life before the fall was free of anxiety. Reinhold thinks this is a nice ideal, but it misses the point that "a life totally without anxiety would lack freedom and not require faith."⁵⁷ Since anxiety is an ontological component of humanity as nature and spirit, overcoming anxiety does not mean union with Christ, but a loss of one's humanness. The implications for eschatological glorification are profound. Reinhold has defined the essence of humanity as "free self-determination." But that freedom inevitably generates anxiety that, when it has conceived, inescapably brings forth sin. Because he equates freedom with autonomy, the eschatological conformity of our will to God's will can only appear to Reinhold as a *loss* of freedom and self-determination. Rather than defining true human freedom as the free will that cannot will evil (as Augustine does)⁵⁸ or as true covenant faithfulness (as Barth does),⁵⁹ Reinhold can only see eschatological glorification as the erasure of humanity, the overcoming and absorption of humanity's anxious freedom into God's will. For Reinhold, anxiety, freedom, and sin are thus permanently woven into the fabric of human nature. To leave any of those behind is to cease to be human. This anthropology significantly affects Reinhold's Christology.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:183, n. 3.

⁵⁸ Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Bruce Harbert (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 28.105; and *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.30.

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (n.p.: John Knox Press, 1960), 77.

The Ideal Jesus

The ethic of Jesus is, for Reinhold, the ethic of absolute love. In its unconcern for calculation and practical compromises, it is contrasted to both naturalistic and prudential ethics, which are based on a false presupposition of harmony. According to Reinhold, “the ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life—the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces.”⁶⁰ The ethic of Jesus therefore has nothing to say to the horizontal realities of politics and economics; it is focused solely on the vertical relationship between the will of God and the will of the individual. For Reinhold, Jesus has to do with purely religious matters, not socio-moral concerns.⁶¹ But Reinhold also argues that since love is the essence of God, it is also the moral ideal. That ideal is, by definition, an “impossible possibility” and “historically unrealizable” in actual human life.⁶² The ethic of Jesus serves a primarily negative function: it presents a regulative ideal that we never attain and thus forces us to acknowledge our sin and limitation. Against liberal optimism, Reinhold emphasizes that the kingdom of God is “always coming but never here.”⁶³

The meaning of the cross of Christ is part of a larger question about the meaning of history, according to Reinhold. To speak of a “Christ” is to say that history is

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 45.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 50.

⁶² For the first term, see Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 36, 50, 60, 97, 106, 109, 111, and 120. For the second, see Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 18, 37, 59, and 101.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 60.

meaningful but in need of fulfillment from beyond itself.⁶⁴ To declare that the Christ must suffer is to make vicarious suffering the meaning of history.⁶⁵ The suffering of the Messiah for human sin symbolizes that the contradictions of history cannot be resolved in history, but only in the eternal and divine. But the eternal does not destroy history; rather, God's mercy makes itself known in history so that humanity may become aware of both guilt and redemption.⁶⁶

The cross therefore reveals the limits and possibilities of history. Because Reinhold defines "historical existence" and society as the realm where individuals and groups seek their own interests at the expense of others, the sacrificial love of the cross is a "tangent towards 'eternity'" that appears within history.⁶⁷ But there is no real possibility of mutual love in history. The ultimate freedom and "perfect disinterestedness" of the divine love can appear in history only in a life that ends tragically because it refuses to participate in the "claims and counterclaims of history."⁶⁸ By nature, divine love cannot maintain itself in historical society or be involved in any exercise of power because any involvement in history and society necessarily means the assertion of one interested ego against another. Thus, the divine can symbolize disinterested love only by a refusal to participate in those rivalries. True love can appear in history only to be negated and crossed out.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:5.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:45.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:46.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:69.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:78.

The cross is therefore simply another way to represent the paradoxical human condition: as spirit we are free to love as we ought and as nature we are limited and driven by the necessities of biophysical life. This interpretation of the cross of Christ with respect to the possibilities and limits of history can also be confirmed by “the fruit of natural experience and a natural (rational) analysis of experience.”⁶⁹ The cross is thus another way to symbolize Reinhold’s view of humanity as nature and spirit.

Because human nature is ontologically fallen and because that inevitably manifests itself in social and cultural life, it is no surprise that to point to God Jesus must point away from all culture, social life, economics, and politics. Humanity’s social-cultural life cannot be considered inherently good but distorted by fallen humans; rather, the creation/fall dialectic characterizes culture, such that it is necessary for human life but also necessarily fallen. The ethic of Jesus therefore has “only a vertical dimension between the loving will of God and the will of man,” with no point of contact between any political or social ethic.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Reinhold ensures that the disinterested ethic of Jesus stands on the “edge of history”⁷¹ and never becomes a divine possibility in history by his tacit denial of the resurrection of Jesus.

Notably, Reinhold’s discussion of the work and person of Christ in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* ends with the cross. Rachel King asks of Reinhold, “What is the

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:96.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 45.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:298.

sequel to the crucifixion in the career of Jesus of Nazareth?”⁷² As she points out, there is none—no discussion of the resurrection, the ascension, or the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ But as King argues, if one sees Jesus as the one who points to God but does not see God as raising Jesus from the dead, this creates problems. The resurrection is precisely the validation of Jesus’ life, teaching, and truth in pointing to the Father. If the Father is the omnipotent loving Father that Jesus thinks he is, he will not abandon Jesus. But if God did not raise Jesus, “then Jesus was simply mistaken in his understanding of the character of God. And so the ethic that he preached is foundationless, for the type of life he counsels men to live is advised on the presupposition that it is permanently supported by the all powerful Heavenly Father.”⁷⁴

But for Reinhold the cross of Christ—not the resurrection or the ascension—is the ultimate interpretive principle that makes clear the truth that humanity is self-transcendent spirit and history-embedded nature.⁷⁵ In other words, Reinhold interprets the cross as the prime example of the anthropology he had already developed on other grounds. The resurrection cannot fit that schema, for it is the kingdom coming *in actuality* and *in history*. Therefore, his omission of the resurrection is not merely an accidental oversight or matter of emphasis but is essential to his thought. There can by definition be no true mutual love in human culture and community. The doctrines that

⁷² King, *Omission of the Holy Spirit*, 129.

⁷³ King, *Omission of the Holy Spirit*, 129. Cf. Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 20-22; and Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 77-78.

⁷⁴ King, *Omission of the Holy Spirit*, 138.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:97.

would support that mutuality—resurrection, the love of God poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), regeneration, a robust ecclesiology—are left out of the picture.

The lack of mutuality and presence of strife in human life has profound effects on the relations of the Godhead. Because he sees mutual love as an ontological impossibility for humanity, Reinhold cannot affirm that the Father raises the Son but leaves him in the ground. Rather than allowing the perfect mutual love between the Father and Son to overflow into human communion with God and one another, Reinhold gives the ontological fallenness of humanity such sway that it pulls the very relation of the Father and Son into its orbit. The logic of Reinhold's position is that human sin not only puts Christ on the cross, but also leaves him in the grave. Although Reinhold sees Jesus as providing the moral ideal, the sum total of his Christology is less than ideal.

Spirit Weak

Those loci generally classified under the third article of the creed are underemphasized and weak in Reinhold's thought.⁷⁶ His view of justification and sanctification follows from how he has conceptualized creation and fall. The point of justification, for Reinhold, is that all we can ever do is repeatedly see that we fall short. We must recognize that sin is inevitable, given that we are nature and spirit, and trust that God forgives us. Justification is simply another way to restate the paradoxical nature of humanity that Reinhold repeatedly emphasizes in *Nature and Destiny*. In a bit of

⁷⁶ For a thorough examination of Reinhold's thought on the Holy Spirit, see King, *Omission of the Holy Spirit*.

Protestant bravado, Reinhold declares that “the full gospel was never fully known or explicitly stated in the church until the Reformation.”⁷⁷ By this, he means that the Reformation renounces the effort to complete life and history, *with* or *without* divine grace, thereby understanding the “tragic aspect” of history better than any preceding classical or Catholic view. Justification by faith is therefore just as much about how to interpret history as it is about soteriology.

Sanctification is in one sense a repetition of justification, the recognition of our continually falling short. According to Reinhold, neither Calvin nor Augustine truly sees this. Reinhold chastises Calvin for being too positive about sanctification because Calvin argues that in sanctification, our carnal desires are increasingly mortified, and our “prevailing inclination” is to submit to God’s will.⁷⁸ Whatever else justification and sanctification may do, they do not, for Reinhold, get rid of the fact that the sin of self-love is always the most “basic” thing about why we do what we do.⁷⁹ Although Reinhold uses language of justification, there is no clear sense in which the Spirit’s work of regeneration actually affects the human heart, mind, and will.⁸⁰

If Reinhold is critical of Calvin, he is even more so of the Roman Catholic position in general and Augustine specifically. The Catholic position, according to Reinhold, is that God’s mercy in Christ turns the sinner from self-love to obedience to

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:148.

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:200. He is referring to Calvin’s *Institutes*, 3:14:9.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:200.

⁸⁰ Cf. Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, 21.

God, enabling growth in grace and progress in sanctification.⁸¹ Catholics rightly believe that love is no simple possibility in the heart of man, but they believe (falsely, for Reinhold) that it is God's possibility in the heart of the individual. Like Calvin, Catholics are mistaken because they do not see that self love remains the most "basic attitude" in human action.⁸² Thus, the Catholic does not appreciate the "tragic quality of the spiritual life" that was discovered in the Reformation.

This tragic quality means that Augustine was mistaken to say that the church may be identified with the Kingdom or City of God.⁸³ The problem with Augustine's thought, for Reinhold, is not that he wrongly identifies or connects the church and Kingdom, but that he connects them *at all*. Reinhold takes any identification to mean that the church does not stand under God's judgment, but constitutes the place where the contradiction between "the historical and the divine" is overcome. Instead, Reinhold contends that the church is the *locus* where God's mercy and judgment on the historical are mediated. As a result, the contradiction between the "historical and the holy" is overcome in principle but not in fact.⁸⁴ Given that Reinhold does not offer a robust view of the Spirit's activity in regeneration and sanctification, it is no surprise that he offers little in the way of ecclesiology.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:135. This generic description could be applied not only to Roman Catholic thought but Protestant orthodoxy as well (e.g., the view of sanctification put forth in the Belgic Confession).

⁸² Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:136.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:138.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:139

The Spirit's eschatological work is also lacking. Christianity, according to Reinhold, sees history after Christ as the interim between the revelation of history's meaning and the fulfillment of that meaning, thereby contradicting the social optimism of liberal Christianity. But this interim is not an historical, eschatological already-not yet. Instead, it is an existential, dialectical already-not yet that describes an "inner contradiction" that is a "perennial characteristic" of human existence and history. Christians have understandably expected a consummation in and of history because Jesus, Paul, and the early church all erroneously interpreted the eschaton as a future point in time.⁸⁵ For Reinhold, the eschaton is a symbol that points to the reality that humans have a sense that our eternal fulfillment impinges on the present moment. Every moment of our time brings us closer to the fulfillment of our life and the dissolution that is our death, but there is no historical consummation of all things. Likewise, there is no such thing as an actual resurrection of the body at a future time. The resurrection, according to Reinhold, is a symbol of the twofold nature of the human self. As spirit, the individual is in direct relation to the eternal. As embedded in nature and history, the individual stands in an indirect relation to the eternal.⁸⁶ The dialectic already-not yet is a productive paradox because it drives history and drives the individual self, but it is a motor that is itself stationary, never actually reaching an eschatological destination. We thus pray for

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:49-50.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:36.

God's kingdom to come, knowing all the while that "it is in fact always coming but never here."⁸⁷

In sum, Reinhold's view of creation, fall, and redemption are linked to his anthropology, which see humans as creatures who are a paradox: finite and free. Creation then refers to the ideal possibility of original righteousness, which stands "outside of history" and judges every act in time.⁸⁸ The fall is not a historically contingent event but an existential term that describes the anxious human who continually acts as though his acts are eternal, not just historical, and thereby exalts himself too high. Redemption is thus the paradoxical recognition that "the final exercise of freedom in the transcendent human spirit is its recognition of the false use of that freedom in action. Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free."⁸⁹ Creation, fall, and redemption are not movements through salvation history, but existential and dialectical descriptions of the life of each human and of all humanity.⁹⁰ This construal of creation, fall, and redemption is not left behind in Reinhold's social ethics but is in fact integral to them.

Two Cities: Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr

To grasp the basis of Reinhold's social thought, it is helpful to compare him to Augustine. For Augustine, there is no ontological inevitability to sin, as there is in

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 60.

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:280.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:260.

⁹⁰ As Gilkey indicates, this description is not without problems: in denying that Adam is the "historical cause of our ills," both Niebuhr and other theologians who follow him seem "unaware that this denial might push them into an ontological necessity, i.e., that the results of the fall are the consequences of creation" (*On Niebuhr*, 133 n. 7).

Reinhold's account. Reinhold's social thought is different from Augustine on three points: for Reinhold, the self is essentially a self-in-competition, justice is essentially a power struggle, and war is an ontological fact of human social life. On each of these points, Augustine and Reinhold conceptualize creation and fall in different ways, and these greatly affect their views of human sociality. To see the difference between the two thinkers, it is helpful to briefly summarize Augustine.

For Augustine, the city of God is inhabited by those who recognize that the good can only be had insofar as it is shared, since the infinite God abundantly supplies the finite creation with an endless source of good.⁹¹ Given the primordial goodness of creation and humanity and God's redemptive work, Augustine presumes that it was and is still possible for humans to live in such a way that communion, not deadly competition, characterizes their life in God's creation. The earthly city, for Augustine, is founded on the rejection of this common good, and the invention of the notion of a purely private good, in which the good is imagined to be rooted in finite creation rather than the infinite God. Thus, the fratricidal Cain and Romulus are archetypes for the human city that assumes that there is a finite limit to the good, creating a zero-sum competition between persons and groups, where the benefit of one is the detriment of the other. Notably, what Augustine characterizes as the earthly city over against the city of God, Reinhold sees as an inherent part of human life. Although some might see this as an overly negative stance, it should be remembered that Reinhold is addressing the issues and politics of his

⁹¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 15.3-15.5.

day and he wants to be sure that no one forgets the absolute pervasiveness of sin in all human endeavors.

In his discussion of self-interest, Reinhold dismisses the notion of a self-in-relation that seeks communion and cooperation rather than competition and self-aggrandizement. Echoing Kant, he argues that obeying the moral law must be interest free.⁹² As self-transcendent spirit, the human is presented with (or presents himself with) the “law,” namely, the transcendent possibilities of acting without interest.⁹³ We see this, for example, in Jesus’ call to the rich young ruler that demands “action in which regard for the self is completely eliminated.”⁹⁴ But disinterested action is not only necessary, it is also the impossible possibility. It cannot be sustained in history because one must deal prudentially with competing claims and interests.⁹⁵ As Reinhold has defined it, to participate in history or society means the assertion of one ego interest against another. Stated differently, Reinhold contends that humans always operate with some measure of *eros*, a love that has some reference to the happiness of the self, whereas the *agape* love

⁹² In discussing the various formulations of the categorical imperative, Kant declares: “By the mere fact that they are categorical, [they] exclude from their sovereign authority every admixture of interest as a motive” and so “cannot possibly as such depend on any interest,” (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton [London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961], 99). Elsewhere, he states, “Reverence is the assessment of a worth which far outweighs all the worth of what is commended by inclination, and the necessity for me to act out of *pure* reverence for the practical law is what constitutes duty, to which every other motive must give way because it is the condition of a good will *in itself*, whose value is above all else.” (*Groundwork*, 71).

⁹³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:278.

⁹⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:287.

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:72.

of the cross has no reference to the good of the self.⁹⁶ Sadly, according to Reinhold, *agape* love cannot appear in history or society without being polluted by *eros*.⁹⁷ Consequently, in his use of the notion of disinterestedness, Reinhold does not outline a place for the happiness and good of the self in ethical theory and action.⁹⁸

For Augustine, however, sin is not *any* self-regard; it is *self-centered* rather than God-centered self-regard.⁹⁹ The issue of valid self-interest is further clarified by John Milbank, who recognizes that in a fallen world, one will often have to sacrifice one's own happiness in order to do what is good.¹⁰⁰ The cross of Christ is a prime example of this. But Milbank differs from Reinhold in arguing that we should not posit an *absolute* disjunction between doing what is good and the happiness of the ethical agent. In other words, Milbank seeks to rehabilitate a proper happiness of the self as a valid goal of the moral life because of his Augustinian doctrine of creation and fall.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:82.

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:108. Cf. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18, 45.

⁹⁸ For assessment of Reinhold and self-interest, see Douglas A. Hicks, "Self-Interest, Agency, and Deprivation." Also, Valerie C. Saiving argues that Reinhold's identification of sin with self-interest and love with selflessness is a masculine way of framing the problem. Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," 100-112. Although Niebuhr's stated goal is to criticize the powerful on behalf of the oppressed, Saiving's analysis suggests that his framework may unwittingly legitimize passivity in the face of oppression.

⁹⁹ For a thorough examination of this aspect of Augustine's thought, see Gerald W. Schlabach, *For the Joy Set Before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁰ Milbank, "The Midwinter Sacrifice: A Sequel to 'Can Morality Be Christian?'" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 10:2 (1997): 31.

¹⁰¹ Milbank, "The Poverty of Niebuhrism," 239.

Reinhold's absolute disjunction between doing the good and the happiness of the ethical agent is directly connected to his conflation of creation and fall.¹⁰² Conversely, Milbank distinguishes between creation and fall in a way that sees self-sacrifice as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, noting that "in a corrupt, fallen world, the only way to the recovery of mutual interaction will pass through sacrifice unto death. But the point is that this sacrifice is not in itself the good, but rather that which sustains a road to the good in adverse circumstances."¹⁰³ For example, Jesus' enduring the cross "for the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2) causes conundrums for Reinhold's thesis regarding disinterestedness. Milbank's line of thought, however, indicates that this text reveals that the *true* and *ultimate* good of the self is not in conflict with the good of the other. The cross then appears not as the inevitable path of divine love in *history*, but the inevitable path of divine love in the midst of *fallen* history, whose immediate cause is the sinfulness of humanity and not the very nature of humanity. Due to his anthropology, Reinhold cannot imagine a created order in which persons with rightly-ordered loves desire God and pursue the common good in harmonious community (which includes rather than excludes the individual's own true good as well). Instead, he reads a consequence of sin and the fall—inordinate self-love rather than God-centered self-love—back into the very fabric of creation.

¹⁰² If we were to follow the suggestion of Hicks, we could map liberalism's public/private dichotomy onto Reinhold's (and Kant's) duty/happiness split. Hicks, "Self-Interest, Deprivation, and Agency," 157.

¹⁰³ Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," *First Things* 91:1 (1999): 35.

This explains in part why Reinhold sees justice as the precarious balance of conflicting self-interests.¹⁰⁴ The domains of politics and economics have to do with justice, not love.¹⁰⁵ Since mutual love is not a viable option in humanity's social-political life, justice is the next best thing by which the interests of each are guarded against unjust violations by others.¹⁰⁶ Society cannot be perfect, so justice entails the strategic use of coercion, conflict, and balancing competing interests.¹⁰⁷ Justice is therefore a perennial power struggle.

Both Augustine and Yoder agree that in a fallen world, this is how justice typically works. But if one has a biblical doctrine of creation and redemption, one can provide a broader account of justice. True justice, argues Augustine, involves rendering what is due to each, including God.¹⁰⁸ Love, worship, and justice are therefore never truly separable. If we love and ascribe proper worth to our Creator God, God will enable us to have rightly ordered loves for all created things and thereby do justice in all our dealings. With a proper view of creation and redemption, love and justice are not two things we are paradoxically caught between, but two ways of saying the same thing: to do justice is to love any particular thing as it ought to be loved. Interestingly, Yoder explicitly emphasizes this same Augustinian point, noting that thinkers who see an absolute

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 128. Cf. "Justice through Revolution" and "Justice through Political Force" in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 169-230.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 169.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," 116.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 131.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.21

disjunction between love and justice do so precisely because they lack a proper doctrine of creation.¹⁰⁹ The fall brings about a relative disjunction between love and justice with the introduction of retributive justice. But retributive justice cannot be a creational norm insofar as it would have been unnecessary in a world where *shalom* reigns. True human nature and the creational natural law have no other norm than *agape*, which is true justice, loving something as it ought to be loved.¹¹⁰

For Reinhold, however, love cannot be the law of our being in the realm of politics, so war will therefore be necessary. Pacifism looks naïve to Reinhold because of his anthropology. Once he has described humanity as the anxious combination of nature and spirit that inevitably produces sin and discord, war becomes a structural or ontological fact of human existence. In other words, peace is not impossible because there are *sinful* humans; peace is impossible because there are *humans*. In response to those who made too little of human sin, Reinhold makes it central. For him, the overt conflict of war is thus “a final and vivid revelation of the character of human existence.”¹¹¹

Notably, Augustine agrees that war between humans is a further revelation of the war that the fallen self experiences internally as disordered loves. Similarly, the eternal destination of the unrighteous is war—the eternal experience of internal and external discord. Hell is war and vice versa. Unlike Reinhold, though, Augustine sees this as the

¹⁰⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 83.

¹¹⁰ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 83.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist,” 108.

revelation of the character of *fallen* human existence, not simply of human existence. Peace with God and with others is how we were created by God, which is why Yoder's pacifism can be seen as deeply Augustinian.¹¹² Because of the way it construes the doctrine of creation and fall, Reinhold's theology and social ethics are ultimately unable to account for the *shalom* that is humanity's true nature and destiny.

H. Richard Niebuhr: The Fall into Culture

As with Reinhold, so H. Richard's views of creation, fall, and redemption are intertwined with his theology of culture. Given the influence of H. Richard's *Christ and Culture*, it is worthwhile to see how his theology of culture interconnects with other key doctrinal loci. In particular, his view of creation and fall significantly affect his Christology and doctrine of the Trinity.

The Fall into Culture

H. Richard views culture as both creational and fallen. H. Richard's definition of culture includes several things that virtually all theologians would consider creational—things such as language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, education, speech, tradition, and sociality.¹¹³ These are creational (or essential) to human life, not an accidental addition due to the fall. Of course, given human fallenness, sin affects every particular instantiation of culture. But as H. Richard continues his definition, he clarifies that culture is not only creational but also fallen. Culture is by definition anthropocentric,

¹¹² Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 235.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

concerned with humanity as the measure of all things.¹¹⁴ This means that in the realm of culture, God cannot be worshipped for his own sake but for the sake of some other end desired by humanity. “Culture” in this sense is roughly equivalent to what the New Testament calls the “world,”¹¹⁵ what Augustine calls the earthly city,¹¹⁶ and what Al Wolters calls “misdirected” culture.¹¹⁷ Culture is also agonistic: every particular culture (and person within each culture) seeks to erase its particularity by claiming that its good is *the* good of humanity.¹¹⁸ Because of such self-seeking, each culture is a site of conflict, where individuals pursue their own interests; and the world as a whole is a site of conflict, where each particular culture stands in conflict with others. Pluralism is thus important for H. Richard, whether between cultures or within a particular culture, because it attempts to respect each person’s right to pursue his or her own “good.” By defining culture in anthropocentric and agonistic terms, H. Richard makes culture fallen by nature, rather than seeing anthropocentrism and conflict as results of cultural perversion.

¹¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 35.

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 15.7: “This is the way of the earthly city: to worship a god or gods so that, with their aid, that city may reign in victory and earthly peace, not by the counsel of charity, but with lust for mastery.”

¹¹⁷ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 49-52.

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 36.

Wolters articulates the conceptual tools needed to further elucidate this point.¹¹⁹ For him, “structure” denotes those elements of human life and culture that are part of God’s creational intention for his good creation. Structure refers to the essence or nature of a cultural practice. From the beginning, God intended that humans cultivate the earth and use their God-given potential to produce culture across the entire spectrum of human life. “Direction,” by contrast, refers to whether human beings instantiate particular cultural practices in a way that is for God’s glory and human flourishing or for sinful human ends. These terms are useful in analyzing H. Richard’s criticism of the “Christ against culture” type.

For H. Richard, 1 John, Tertullian, and Tolstoy stand against culture in a variety of ways.¹²⁰ 1 John draws a clear line between the church and world; Tertullian rejects political life, military service, and philosophical attempts to merge Christianity with Stoicism and Platonism; and Tolstoy rejects war, a society built on self-protection, and the taking of oaths. Yet, as H. Richard points out, these “radicals” inevitably use culture, despite any disavowals they might make. For instance, 1 John uses terms that Gnostic philosophers also use; Tertullian employs legal and philosophical language and concepts of Rome; and Tolstoy’s pacifism reflects something of his Russian sense of mystical communion with all humanity and nature. Moreover, H. Richard argues that Christians always have to use language that is already in play in their culture (like “Messiah,” “Lord,” or “love”) and that the fulfillment of the law of love requires cultural

¹¹⁹ For a thorough discussion of this point, see Wolters’ chapter “Discerning Structure and Direction” in *Creation Regained*.

¹²⁰ These thinkers are addressed at length in Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 45-65.

specificity.¹²¹ That is, concrete acts of love require knowledge of what specific acts would count as “love” toward someone who occupies a specific place in a culture. Love cannot be embodied except in culture. Even if Christians were to attempt to withdraw from non-Christian society and culture, their life together would require organization, human achievement, and concern for temporal ends like food and shelter.¹²² The radical position is therefore naïve because it thinks it can escape culture and inconsistent because it sometimes rejects culture and sometimes accepts it.

Notice, however, the equivocation in H. Richard’s analysis. Rather than differentiate between conditions of creaturehood, or structure, and fallen cultural development, or misdirection, he sees only inconsistency. Among other things, 1 John rejects the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; Tertullian rejects participation in warfare; and Tolstoy criticizes unjust economic practices. These thinkers, however, are not rejecting culture *per se* as much as particular perverted cultural practices or, in Wolter’s terms, misdirected culture. These practices are fallen perversions of true culture. The author of 1 John does not advocate content-less love that floats above culture; he says that the way Christians show love is by sharing goods with those who need them. This is not theoretical inconsistency, but practical love. Tertullian does not argue that humans have no need of social organization; he states that upholding that organization by means of violence is not the calling of the Christian. Tolstoy does not argue that following Jesus means that humans do not need food and shelter; he contends

¹²¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 70-71.

¹²² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 72.

that the process of obtaining food and shelter in the Russia of his day was characterized by profound injustice. This is not to say that these thinkers are all correct in their conclusions. But whereas all spoke against what they took to be *fallen* aspects of their culture, H. Richard negatively assesses this position on the basis that one cannot escape *creational* aspects of culture. It therefore becomes apparent that the “against culture” position cannot be consistently held, according to H. Richard, because to do so one would have to cease being human, a further indication that he sometimes uses “culture” to refer to something creational, sometimes fallen. It is thus not the radicals’ position but H. Richard’s equivocation that allows him to criticize them so potently. Whereas the radical position should be seen as debating *ethical* possibilities (and impossibilities), H. Richard has framed the debate so that being “against culture” is by definition an *ontological* impossibility. Moreover, by defining culture as inherently fallen, H. Richard has inscribed the fall back onto creation. On H. Richard’s read, the creation mandate to be cultivators was the mandate to go forth and fall into culture.

Christ and Concrete Cultural Norms

In order to understand H. Richard’s project in *Christ and Culture*, it is helpful to see where he ends that work: prescriptive pluralism. H. Richard is keen to argue that one cannot give definitive answers about God’s will in particular human cultures for a variety of reasons, including our fragmentary knowledge, our relative amount of faith or unbelief, our position within history and society, and the relativity of our values.¹²³ H. Richard therefore underscores humility with respect to his five types: no one can claim

¹²³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 234.

“This is *the* Christian answer.”¹²⁴ Such a claim, argues H. Richard, usurps Christ’s lordship, does violence to the Christian liberty of others, and presumes that our particular place in the church and in history allows us to have the eschatological fullness of God’s word.¹²⁵ H. Richard is right to be concerned, since Christians have many times confused their particular cultural manifestations with the fullness of God’s Kingdom. On closer examination, however, this prescriptive pluralism has profound effects on his views of Christ and culture. Christ is nothing more than a sign pointing to the Absolute, and culture is left devoid of any criteria regarding what transformation actually entails. Moreover, H. Richard favors the type, “Christ the Transformer of Culture,” precisely because, as he describes it, it entails a prescriptive pluralism that refuses to make any substantive, binding claims.

H. Richard’s Christ points away from culture to the Absolute God. H. Richard approvingly cites Joseph Klausner’s assertion that Jesus abstracted religion and ethics from the rest of social life. Instead of reforming culture, Jesus ignored it and “everything concerned with material civilization.”¹²⁶ Jesus is the exemplar of radical monotheism, “that unique devotion to God and to that single-hearted trust in Him which can be symbolized by no other figure of speech so well as by the one which calls him Son of God.”¹²⁷ H. Richard underscores that “in his single-minded direction toward God, Christ

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 231.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 232.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 3.

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27.

leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture,”¹²⁸ pointing away from the values of humanity’s social life and all that is conditioned to the One who is “Unconditioned.”¹²⁹ Elsewhere, H. Richard further describes this God as the “one beyond all the many”¹³⁰ and the “principle of being itself.”¹³¹ Idolatry, then, treats the finite as absolute or the relative as the universal.¹³² This leads H. Richard to be quite pessimistic about the ability of the absolute to appear in the midst of the finite: “When the principle of being is God—i.e., the object of trust and loyalty—then he alone is holy and ultimate sacredness must be denied to any special being. No special places, times, persons, or communities are more representative of the One than any others are.”¹³³

This absolute disjunction between the absolute and the finite negatively affects H. Richard’s Christology, leading some scholars to charge him with a Gnostic, Docetic, or Nestorian Christology whereas others charge him with a liberal, only-human Jesus.¹³⁴ Those who charge him with the former do so because H. Richard’s conclusion that Jesus

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40.

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28.

¹³⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 24.

¹³¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 37. Glen Stassen notes that these terms are striking because H. Richard had previously criticized them as “abstract and pre-Christian.” (Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms,” 175).

¹³² E.g., Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 211.

¹³³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 52.

¹³⁴ The charges of Docetism, Gnosticism, and Nestorianism come, respectively, in Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 64, and “Yoder’s Critique of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,” 392; Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers*, 300, n. 21; and Long, *The Goodness of God*, 82. Charges of a liberal Christology are made by Carter, “Yoder’s Critique of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,” 395; Gardner, “Ethical Issues for the 1970’s,” 206; Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 42-46; Kliever, “The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 45; Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms,” 176; and Wittmer, “Analysis and Critique of ‘Christ the Transformer of Culture,’” 153.

is unrelated to culture can be reached only by ignoring Jesus' humanity. Those who charge him with a merely human Jesus do so because H. Richard depicts Jesus as pointing away from himself to the Father. The New Testament, however, not only portrays the Son pointing to the Father, but the Father pointing back to the Son (e.g., Mark 9:7). Yoder weighs in on this issue, noting that H. Richard ignores several characteristics of Christ as depicted in the New Testament and classical theology, characteristics that "would have made impossible the interpretation of Jesus as 'pointing away' from the realm of culture, and thereby as needing the corrective of a 'more balanced' position."¹³⁵ Jesus did not come to point away from all culture to the Absolute but at least in part to point to certain cultural options and away from others. If H. Richard were to call attention to this, however, it would undermine his own position of prescriptive pluralism. Ultimately, H. Richard's prescriptive pluralism, the Absolute God of radical monotheism, and the Jesus who points away from any concrete culture are all of a piece.¹³⁶

Christ, therefore, is important primarily as a pointer to the transcendent God who destabilizes all historically particular configurations of culture. As Stassen argues, H. Richard was acutely aware of the way that historical and cultural conditions affect all attempts to know and proclaim the truth. This recognition of our hermeneutic horizons

¹³⁵ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," 60. Those characteristics are (1) Jesus is the incarnate Son of God whose teaching is authoritative and whose person is unique, (2) Jesus' death provides atonement for human sin and his resurrection provides the basis for new power in human experience, (3) Jesus is an exemplary human whose disciples are called to follow him not in "slavish mimicry but...free discipleship," and (4) by virtue of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he is affirmed as Lord over nature and human history.

¹³⁶ Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms," 185.

need not mean an absolute relativism, however, and Stassen shows how H. Richard endeavored to outline norms that would validate the truth of Christianity from *within* history.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, Stassen also shows H. Richard reacted so strongly against Barth that he advocated not merely a hermeneutic of humility but a position of “equiprobabilist relativism,”¹³⁸ in which H. Richard became reticent to affirm the ability of any historically-located person or church to proclaim that any particular practice was definitively God’s will for that place and time. This is seen in H. Richard’s negative evaluation of the “Christ above culture” type and his positive depiction of the “Christ transforming culture” type.

For H. Richard, the “Christ above culture” type tends to claim too much. He acknowledges there is a divine law which humans access by reason, but holds that any particular formulation of this law in language and concepts will be culturally conditioned.¹³⁹ The “Christ above culture” type continually forgets this and sees its own articulation of God’s law as that law itself. Consequently, the “Christ above culture” type perpetually falls back into the “Christ of culture” type. Because what we call “God’s law” is always our interpretation of God’s law rather than the transcendent law itself, we must not only be humble but also suspend judgment about any particular cultural practice. If the “above culture” synthesists were humble enough to acknowledge that their action is a purely symbolic human action, that would be fine; when they claim their action may

¹³⁷ Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms,” 156-172.

¹³⁸ Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms,” 176. In a 1960 address at Union Theological Seminary, H. Richard himself stated that he had spent the last decade intentionally leaning the opposite direction of Barth (174).

¹³⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

participate in the kingdom of God on earth, they are insufficiently circumspect. By contrast, proper pluralistic humility is a characteristic only of the conversionist type.¹⁴⁰

For H. Richard, the transformationist type speaks of Christ correctly because it is humble and pluralistic enough to disavow any certainty with respect to God's will for human culture. Humility and pluralism come from, in part, a disavowal of the doctrine of election. The Gospel of John, Augustine, and John Calvin all fall short of being true transformationists, according to H. Richard, because they continue to cling to this doctrine.¹⁴¹ H. Richard notes that both Scripture and Christians often identify a particular people (Israel and the church) as set apart. Importantly, election is not only about eternal destiny, but about present cultural practices. For example, when God sets Israel apart, he gives them very specific guidelines as to how they are and are not to behave with respect to a whole variety of cultural practices. Election is problematic, according to H. Richard, because it focuses on one particular people or one particular cultural option.

For H. Richard, the true transformationist is a soteriological universalist. The transformationist rejects the notion that "the Christian life is cultural life converted by the regeneration of man's spirit" and instead has a change of vision so that he or she can see that all humans and all cultural existence are already transformed.¹⁴² There is irony here. H. Richard assumes that the kingdom of God cannot become a reality in his first four

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 147.

¹⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 204, 216-218.

¹⁴² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 205.

types.¹⁴³ The kingdom is possible, however, in the conversionist position precisely because the conversionist does not claim anything binding about his or her way of life, for that would violate the principle of pluralism. H. Richard does not merely hold to what I would call a “diachronic pluralism,” in which there is a proper contextual and creational diversity in which Christians give different answers to different cultural questions at different times and in different places. Instead, he holds to a “synchronic pluralism,” in which Christians in the same culture confronting the same issue give different and contradictory answers. With issues of adiaphora and Christian liberty, this is no problem, but with other issues, it raises the question of the church’s faithfulness. H. Richard’s position seems to imply that if one makes a binding normative claim about God’s will regarding a specific ethical matter or cultural practice, one violates this prescriptive pluralism. Thus, to say “this is what you ought to do too” is immediately to put oneself in the “against culture” or “above culture” position rather than the conversionist. Being a transformationist therefore means that one never actually tells someone they *ought* to do something (unless, ironically, that something is to stop telling others what to do).

H. Richard rightly wanted Christians to recognize their fallibility, their historicity, and their ever-present hermeneutical matrix. These are all legitimate points. Nevertheless, by virtue of the fact that I am human and always interpreting, I can say something about what God requires of *me* but I cannot go beyond that to pretend that I may be able to discern something that is morally binding for other people.¹⁴⁴ Stated differently, H.

¹⁴³ Cf. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 239.

Richard's "Christ the Transformer of Culture" does not indicate concrete Christological norms but uses Christ as a cipher to reject any concrete norms, precisely because those norms will always be formulated in human history, language, and concepts. "Christ" is thus another name for Lessing's ditch.

As a result, H. Richard's pluralism and universalism transform his understanding of the redemption of culture so that it becomes nothing more than an intellectual exercise of re-framing what one is already doing in one's culture. "The sovereignty of God" and "the lordship of Christ" now mean that all our cultural institutions are *already* participating in God's kingdom.¹⁴⁵ H. Richard's claim that "there is no phase of human culture over which Christ does not rule, and no human work which is not subject to his transforming power over self-will" sounds right.¹⁴⁶ But his other points must be kept in mind, namely, that Christ does not tell us anything concrete but points away from culture and that the notion of election must be rejected, whether it is with respect to persons and cultural practices, or whether it is related to the present or future. Since Jesus is Lord of this sphere of life (which means that I cannot give concrete criteria to distinguish between good and evil in this sphere, but must trust in God's sovereignty), I may participate in it. Christians continue doing what they were already doing as a part of their culture, but with a new rationale to justify their actions. Under the guise of biblical language of sovereignty and lordship, Christians become passive toward the real evils of their particular culture and lose any criteria by which to judge faithfulness or unfaithfulness to

¹⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 226, 256.

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 227.

their Lord.¹⁴⁷ In the end, what goes by the name of transformation is really accommodation.¹⁴⁸

Orthodox Trinitarianism or Heterodox Unitarianisms?

Just as his understanding of Christ in *Christ and Culture* is governed by the principle of pluralism, so H. Richard's doctrine of the Trinity is less about the persons that comprise the Godhead and more about the pluralism that ought to be accepted in the church. Throughout *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard repeatedly faults certain types for failing to be Trinitarian. The "Christ against culture" type overemphasizes Jesus and underemphasizes the Father as Creator and Governor of history, as well as the Spirit who is immanent in creation and the Christian community.¹⁴⁹ The "Christ of culture" type forgets that the Father transcends all particular cultures.¹⁵⁰ The "Christ above culture" type is commended because at its best it faithfully represents the Trinity, although it generally slides back into the "Christ of culture" type.¹⁵¹ "Christ transforming culture," H. Richard's favored type, is said to be preferable because it is properly Trinitarian and therefore most accurately understands the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and

¹⁴⁷ Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms," 145; Wilson, "Christ and Cult(ure)," 183; and Wittmer, "Analysis and Critique of 'Christ Transforming Culture,'" 244.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. J. Klapwijk's notion of "inverse transformation" in Klapwijk, "Antithesis, Synthesis, and the Idea of Transformational Philosophy," *Philosophia Reformata* 51 (1986): 147-148.

¹⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 81.

¹⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 114-115.

¹⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 131.

redemption.¹⁵² This sounds promising, but closer examination reveals that H. Richard's doctrine of the Trinity is not so orthodox, which raises questions about his theology of culture that follows from it. Rather than making the coherence between Father, Son, and Spirit the basis of true ecumenicity, H. Richard reads the contradiction between Arians, Marcionites, and spiritualists back into the very nature of the Trinitarian God. This becomes apparent when attention is paid to how he articulates the relationship between the persons of the Father and Son, and between creation and redemption.

H. Richard proposes that we think of Christianity as an "association...of three Unitarian religions," with different Christians identifying with one particular person of the Godhead and claiming that person as "the one God."¹⁵³ Thus, there are Unitarians of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit. The Unitarianisms listed by H. Richard are not simply various stands of Trinitarian-affirming Christians who emphasize one person or another in their practical piety. Instead, H. Richard includes positions that would deny the doctrine of the Trinity as traditionally understood. For example, the Unitarianism of the Father includes Arians, Deists, and Unitarians (in the more narrow sense), and the chief example of Unitarianism of the Son is Marcion.¹⁵⁴ As in *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard emphasizes pluralism, arguing that the truth is the sum of all the positions presented. Even if a doctrine of the Trinity was not needed to accurately speak of God, it would be

¹⁵² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 192-193.

¹⁵³ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 372-373. The importance of this article should not be underestimated. In addition to its original publication in 1946, it was re-published as "Theological Unitarianisms," *Theology Today* 40, no. 2 (1983): 150-157 and, even though already published twice, it was also included in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁴ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 373-374.

necessary to maintain that Christianity is “not the realized conviction of any of its parts but rather the common faith.”¹⁵⁵ The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is to show that all the partial insights of the various Unitarianisms must be held together synthetically. “A doctrine of the Trinity, so formulated,” H. Richard concludes, “will never please any one part of the church but it will be an ecumenical doctrine providing not for the exclusion of heretics but for their inclusion in the body on which they are actually dependent. Truth, after all, is not the possession of any individual of any party or school, but is represented, insofar as it can be humanly represented, only by the whole dynamic and complementary work of the company of knowers and believers.”¹⁵⁶

H. Richard’s absolute pluralism creates problems when he articulates the relationship between the Father and Son. For H. Richard, the Father creates the world, governs history, grounds natural theology, and rules over nature and secular societies.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 383.

¹⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 384. Did H. Richard really mean to be setting forth a doctrine of the Trinity or was he simply using it as a metaphor to try to emphasize the need for unity in the church? After noting the Sabellian-sounding way that H. Richard portrayed the Trinity in this article, Yoder notes, “It can hardly be assumed that H. Richard Niebuhr was ignorant of the real historic meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity. Did he really mean his appeal to the Trinity to count as a theological argument? I have put this question to several former students and friendly interpreters of H. Richard Niebuhr. None of them seem to believe that he meant seriously to claim that the distributive or modalist use which he makes of the doctrine of the Trinity, for purposes of a corrective polemic against one-sidedness in modern ethics, should be taken as real appeal to what was at stake in Nicea. Yet the more refined and sophisticated a theologian is, the less we should let him get away with this kind of creative distortion of the real meaning of historically derived norms. Within historical Christianity, the classical rightness of being trinitarian, [*sic*], as corrective for the symbolic inadequacy of anything more simple, is a powerful indirect value claim. If Niebuhr really meant only to be using the metaphor of the unity of the Godhead as shorthand for the idea of keeping several things in balance, and not to be claiming the momentum of canonical orthodoxy in favor of his preference, it is regrettable that he reached for so high a figure of speech. Certainly many who in his train have used the notion that an ethic must be trinitarian have given it the weight of such a truth claim.” Yoder, “Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” 63.

¹⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 80-81, and “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 373.

By means of human reason we can therefore look at the world and discern the Father's will for human life. The problem is that the conclusions of natural theology do not always match up with Scripture in general and the revelation given in Jesus in particular. For H. Richard, what we know via creation—in the natural world and in human society by means of reason—differs from what we find in Christ. How is this contradiction between Father and Son, creation and Christ to be handled? H. Richard does not attempt to find coherence between the two, but emphasizes pluralism, which admits that the faith of the one church requires these opposing unitarianisms. Yoder, however, rightly points out that “the intention of the post-Nicene doctrine of the Trinity was precisely *not* that through Father, Son, and Spirit differing revelations come to us. The entire point of the debate around the nature of the Trinity was the concern of the church to say just the opposite, namely that in the Incarnation and in the continuing life of the church under the Spirit there is but one God.”¹⁵⁸

The effects of H. Richard's pluralism on heresy and the doctrine of the Trinity are profound. As the church of the fourth century attempted to be both faithful to biblical language and logical regarding what one could or could not say, they excluded certain things as incapable of fulfilling these criteria. These positions were heresy. For H. Richard, however, heresy with respect to doctrinal substance must be allowed, so that, as Craig Carter puts it, the church would of necessity include “the Arians and liberals along with the Swedenborgians and pietists and...the mystics and metaphysical idealists. All are heretical in and of themselves, yet all are essential to the whole faith of the whole

¹⁵⁸ Yoder, “Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” 62 (original emphasis).

church.”¹⁵⁹ H. Richard argues that any particular position, by definition, cannot possess the truth; instead, truth is represented “only by the whole dynamic and complementary” gamut of anyone who says anything about who and what they think the Christian God is. Presumably, the position held by that party which confesses that God is one *ousia* and three *hypostases* is insufficiently ecumenical because it is held by some particular people and not others. Since H. Richard sees the doctrine of the Trinity as a doctrine that allows for rather than excludes heretical views of God, it would seem to follow that the only anathema would be against those who would label themselves orthodox in any exclusive sense. Here we again see H. Richard’s awareness of historical embeddedness and his hermeneutic humility, which become so strong that they lead him to be an equiprobabilist relativist not only with respect to knowing God’s will regarding particular cultures (as noted above) but regarding the capability of humans to make affirmations regarding the nature of God.

H. Richard ascribes contradictory content to Father and Son in part because his description of culture equivocates and conflates creation and fallen. Since by “culture” he means something that is both created and fallen and, because the Father is identified as Creator of human nature and culture, conflict between the Father and Son is inevitable. Whereas the radical position sees Christ as countering *fallen* culture, H. Richard reads that position as simply against culture, which resides under the rubric of the Father. So, just as the Unitarianism of the Father and Son are not to be brought into a coherent Trinitarian unity, neither may Christ and creation be brought together in a coherent

¹⁵⁹ Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 124.

theology of culture. Indeed, just as the coherence produced by Nicene orthodoxy would exclude some ways of speaking about God, so coherence between Christ and creation would exclude some ways of being in culture, namely, those discerned as fallen. This is exactly what H. Richard's thought, with its pluralistic emphasis, seems to disallow.

In sum, H. Richard's thought has three shortcomings. First, his functional use of the term "culture" is equivocal, such that he sometimes uses it to refer to creational aspects of culture and other times uses it to refer to the fallen direction that specific cultures take.¹⁶⁰ Second, it leads to a Christ who is by definition unrelated to culture. A Christ who judges any and every particular form of culture equally is, in the end, a Christ who judges no particular form of culture. This explains why H. Richard's concept of "transformation" is abstract and lacks concrete criteria. Third, in his appeal to Trinitarianism, H. Richard sets the Father as Creator and Son as Redeemer in competition and contradiction. Christ and creation thus become two alternate and competing authorities for the Christian's loyalty in culture, to say nothing of the Spirit as providing a third avenue of potentially contradictory revelation. For H. Richard's pluralism, some Christians follow the light of creation and others trod the way of Jesus. Trinitarianism, thinks H. Richard, accepts contradiction and competition between the persons of the Trinity, seeing the true church as a fold large enough to hold all heresies. H. Richard's conflation of creation and fall, his problematic Christology, his unorthodox Trinitarianism, and his lack of substantive and discriminating criteria for cultural

¹⁶⁰ Wittmer persuasively argues that H. Richard conflates creation, fall, and redemption, and that this has serious consequences for his thought ("Analysis and Critique of Christ the Transformer of Culture," 265-275).

transformation are integrally linked. These theological problems cast aspersions upon H. Richard's theology of culture making it an unsuitable option for a theology of culture that is both biblical and consistent with classical orthodoxy. Although it is Trinitarian in language, it is not in substance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that both Niebuhrs conflate creation and fall. They also fail to account for the consistency and coherence between creation and redemption and Father, Son, and Spirit. Reinhold's anthropology places evil into the very structure of creation, he views culture and society as a realm of inherent strife, and the work and person of Christ terminate at the cross. H. Richard uses the term "culture" in an equivocal way, without a clear distinction between creational and fallen aspects of culture. Furthermore, his view of Christ is problematic insofar as Christ is inherently unrelated to culture. This sets up a Jesus who is at some times only human and at others not fully human. Finally, his appeal to the Trinity actually pits the Father against the Son and creation against Christ, rather than showing how they properly cohere. The overall theology of culture presented by the Niebuhrs has problems with the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ, it conflates creation and fall and sets creation and redemption at odds with one another. Because of these deficiencies, their theology of culture is not compatible with classical orthodoxy or with a view of the biblical narrative that takes creation, fall, redemption, and consummation as historical, chronological categories rather than existential, dialectical ones.

Near the beginning of this chapter, I noted Yoder's observation that the relationship between the Jesus of *Politics* and Reinhold Niebuhr was one of "total theological encounter."¹⁶¹ One could also say that Yoder's engagement with both Niebuhr brothers is one of total theological encounter, dealing with such basics as the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ; of the meaning of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation; and of the role of the Spirit and the church in the life of the Christian. I have shown that the Niebuhrs had deficiencies and that Yoder saw and rightly criticized those deficiencies. Yoder's thought must now be spelled out more fully in order to see how his Trinitarian theology of culture constitutes a more biblical and theologically orthodox alternative.

¹⁶¹ Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 317-318.

CHAPTER 3: GOD'S WORD AND OUR WORDS: YODER AND THE CREEDS

Introduction

The Niebuhrs use Trinitarian language without substance; Yoder does not. To those operating with caricatures of Yoder's position, this claim may seem objectionable. His Anabaptism is taken to be at odds with creedal Christianity and possibly Trinitarianism, his historicism is taken to be at odds with the creeds' metaphysical and ontological language, and his anti-Constantinianism is taken to be at odds with the man Constantine who was firmly enmeshed in the proceedings of Nicea. At best, Yoder is perceived to be indifferent to the Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy of the creeds and, at worst, downright hostile to it.¹ To substantiate my claim that Yoder offers a Trinitarian theology of culture that upholds the continuity and coherence between creation and redemption, it is therefore necessary to show how his thought is compatible with Scripture and creedal orthodoxy, especially regarding the Trinitarian and Christological formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon.² If Yoder is hostile to the creeds

¹ My focus here is on Nicea and Chalcedon. When Yoder references the creeds, it is typically these two. Moreover, he addresses them at length in *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001).

² I am not the first to make the case that Yoder is compatible with creedal orthodoxy. This is done well in both Craig Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), and Mark Thiessen Nation, "Mending Fences and Finding Grace: Regarding Christology and Divine Agency in Yoder's Thought," presented at the Yoder Project, Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, May 2007, accessed at <http://www.emu.edu/seminary/resources/christologymtn.html>, Aug. 11, 2009.

and their doctrines of God, I ought not label his work “Trinitarian.” My task in this chapter is thus to delineate Yoder’s complicated stance toward the creeds, thereby removing potential objections to my claim that he furnishes a Trinitarian theology of culture.³

Yoder’s relationship to the creeds—and concomitantly his Christology and Trinitarianism—is a contentious topic. Some scholars accuse him of a low, less-than-orthodox Christology whereas others argue for his compatibility with creedal Christology. Among those who regard Yoder as Christologically unorthodox, some see this as a problem and others laud him for it. A. James Reimer presents Yoder as hostile to language of ontology and metaphysics and therefore to the creeds.⁴ Thomas Finger argues that Yoder’s Christology lacks any “transcendent dimension.”⁵ He thinks Yoder may deny the divinity of Christ, which would undermine not only the creeds but also the Bible. Whereas Reimer and Finger criticize Yoder’s “anti-creedalism,” J. Denny Weaver approvingly cites Yoder’s “relativizing” of the creeds as the grounds for his own project of casting Weaver’s version of Anabaptist theology as an alternative to the “violence

³ I defer the question of the content of Yoder’s Christology to the next chapter. This chapter deals with the more formal question of the nature of the creeds.

⁴ A. James Reimer, “Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 16 (Spring 1998): 12; Reimer, “Theological Orthodoxy and Jewish Christianity,” in *Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Heubner, Harry J. Heubner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 435.

⁵ Thomas Finger, “Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics?” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2004), 333.

accommodating” creedal formulas of Nicene-Chalcedonian Christianity.⁶ Weaver explicitly frames his own work as a logical extension of Yoder’s.⁷ Similarly, Gerald Biesecker-Mast claims that Yoder takes a primarily negative view of the creeds, seeing them as “a sign for the division brought about by the coercion of doctrine.”⁸ Whether they approve of creedal orthodoxy or not, these thinkers all see Yoder as hostile or incompatible with it in some way.

Other scholars see Yoder’s thought as compatible with the creeds. The strong version of this position is Craig Carter’s claim that Yoder’s social ethics are “rooted in” creedal orthodoxy.⁹ The more nuanced way of stating it is presented by Alain Epp Weaver (not to be confused with J. Denny Weaver), who argues that Yoder saw the creeds as valid, missionary translations of the Bible’s message.¹⁰ They are not as authoritative as Scripture, but neither are they to be rejected as illegitimate simply because they are not Scripture. Alain Epp Weaver’s position is reinforced by Mark Thiessen Nation and Jonathan Slater.¹¹

⁶ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 92-96; and “The United States Shape of Mennonite Theologizing: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (July 1999), 639-640.

⁷ J. Denny Weaver, “The United States Shape of Mennonite Theologizing,” 640.

⁸ Gerald Biesecker-Mast, “The Radical Christological Rhetoric of John Howard Yoder,” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 42.

⁹ Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 93.

¹⁰ Alain Epp Weaver, “Missionary Christology: John Howard Yoder and the Creeds,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 3 (2000): 423-439.

¹¹ Mark Thiessen Nation, “Mending Fences and Finding Grace: Regarding Christology and Divine Agency in Yoder’s Thought”; Jonathan Slater, “Does Yoder throw the Christological baby out with the

Why do some scholars see Yoder as simply exposing the implications of orthodoxy whereas others see him as downright anti-creedal? Because they often jump straight to what Yoder says about the creeds without examining how his view of the creeds fits within the context of his broader theology, including his view of the nature of theological language and the authority of tradition. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Yoder sees the creeds as legitimate extensions of the New Testament because Nicea and Chalcedon do in the fourth and fifth centuries what the New Testament does in the first. Although I will not fully unpack Yoder's Christology until the next chapter, I show here that Yoder does not dismiss the creeds in part because, like the New Testament, they enter into specific thought worlds and refashion those linguistic and conceptual worlds in such a way that Christians can affirm that Jesus is Messiah and Lord within that world.¹² Put differently, the creeds go beyond the Bible precisely by *not* going beyond the Bible. They go beyond the Bible in that they must communicate the Gospel in new missionary situations that were not the context of the original writings of Scripture; but they do *not* go beyond the Bible in that they communicate that message faithfully, with different words and sometimes different concepts from the text of Scripture itself. Thus, for those who take the Bible and the creeds seriously, Yoder's theology of culture does not represent a sectarian, anti-Trinitarian path but one that attempts to take seriously what

Constantinian bathwater?" presented at the Yoder Project, Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, May 2007, accessed at <http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/tmtc/Slater-YoderProject.pdf>, Aug. 17, 2009.

¹² If we are no longer part of the thought worlds to which the creeds were addressed, can we dispense with them? In my view, Yoder would say no, not least because he himself sees that they must be addressed. But the creeds, like the Bible, are both applicable and always in translation. The question is not whether they are dispensable but whether we have adequately translated them so that we can understand precisely why they are indispensable.

Christianity has claimed about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whether in Scripture, through the creeds, or into our day.

Yoder's Appeal to Creedal Orthodoxy

A brief sampling of his works demonstrates that Yoder frequently appeals to Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy both to support his own position and to assess the thought of others.¹³ Unless we have good reason to do otherwise, a straightforward reading of Yoder takes him at his word when he affirms the teachings of the creeds and his contention that his own thought is consistent with the creeds. In *Politics*, Yoder claims that “the view of Jesus being proposed here is more radically Nicene and Chalcedonian than other views. I do not here advocate an unheard-of modern understanding of Jesus. I ask rather that the implications of what the church has always said about Jesus as Word of the Father, as true God and true Human, be taken more seriously, as relevant to our social problems, than ever before.”¹⁴ Yoder also claims that his Christian pacifism stands or falls with the claim that Jesus is Christ, Lord, and true revelation of God.¹⁵ Although Yoder acknowledges criticisms that the Jesus of *Politics* is a diversion from traditional Christology, he disavows them.¹⁶ In fact, he argues that the

¹³ He also appeals to the Apostles' creed at several points. For example, see Yoder, “A Theological Critique of Violence,” in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009): 39-40.

¹⁴ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 102.

¹⁵ Yoder, *Nevertheless*, 125: Yoder's pacifism “would lose its substance if Jesus were not Christ and its foundation if Jesus Christ were not Lord.” One epigram to this chapter is a quote from T. S. Eliot: “The hint half guessed, half understood, is Incarnation.”

¹⁶ Yoder, “That Household We Are,” (unpublished address, Believers Church Conference on “Is There a Believers' Church Christology?” Bluffton, OH, Oct. 23-25, 1980), 9.

Christology of *Politics* does “not mean a reduction; it rather sought to safeguard the wholeness of the classical Christology.”¹⁷ That is, Yoder is not denying but extrapolating the implications of Chalcedon: “We misunderstand the relationship between Christ’s two natures if we wipe out the political side of his human existence.”¹⁸

Yoder also claims to be more consistent with classical orthodoxy than some of his targets. At the beginning of *Politics*, Yoder asks, “What becomes of the meaning of the incarnation if Jesus is not normatively human? If he is human but not normative, is this not the ancient ebionitic heresy? If he be somehow authoritative but not in his humanness, is this not a new gnosticism?”¹⁹ There are two ways of functionally denying creedal Christology. Modern liberal theology is often blatantly Ebionitic, notes Yoder. But Gnosticism also surfaces covertly among creedally orthodox Christians. So, throughout Christian history, a central threat to Christology has not been an external Ebionism (e.g., modern non-Christians who think Jesus was merely a good moral teacher) but an internal Gnosticism or Docetism that emphasizes Jesus’ divinity to the point that it eclipses his humanity. Even today, theologically conservative Christians who argue vociferously that the divinity of Jesus must be confessed and named may either unwittingly ignore Jesus’ humanity or implicitly (or perhaps even explicitly) deny the

¹⁷ Yoder, “The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King,” in *For the Nations*, 138, n. 26. Cf. Yoder, *Politics*, 226. Carter also makes this point in *Politics of the Cross*, 130.

¹⁸ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddart (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 58.

¹⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 10.

normativity of Jesus' humanity.²⁰ For the Chalcedonian Christian, argues Yoder, rejecting the normativity of Jesus' humanity is as theologically and ethically problematic as rejecting his divinity.

Yoder also combats H. Richard Niebuhr's "Trinitarianism," as noted in the previous chapter.²¹ The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity, Yoder argues, is not to explain how God reveals himself in contradictory ways, which is how H. Richard employs it. Instead, orthodox Trinitarianism means to emphasize that there is a unity between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persons of the Trinity neither work nor reveal themselves in ways that contradict one another. For example, even though only the Son assumes humanity, this does not automatically place the Son at odds with the Father and Spirit. Although there is distinction between the three persons, there is coherence to who God is and how he reveals himself. That the Father is distinct from the Son and that both are distinct from the Spirit would have been the obvious conclusion of Jesus' first disciples and anyone else who reads the New Testament. As a result, the doctrine of the Trinity initially sought to explain the fundamental *unity* of Father, Son, and Spirit. In

²⁰ For example, see D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52-59, 159-172. Carson clearly affirms the full humanity of Jesus. Carson, however, manages to address Jesus and the kingdom he announced without connecting this to a new way of being political and cultural. Although he finds Jesus advocating for a secular, demythologized state, Carson's main focus is on Jesus' humanity only as a vehicle to provide atonement for sin and therefore get the Christian to heaven rather than hell (58). This is not wrong in itself, but far too narrow. In a work by a New Testament scholar that addresses Christ and culture, it is a startlingly thin account of Jesus' humanity and all that entails for human life and culture. Moreover, when Carson later addresses the "church and state," he operates with the assumption that one has to do with religion (that is, with eternal destinies of souls) whereas the other has to do with politics (that is, with the activities of earthly bodies). Yoder, on the other hand, does not share this assumption.

²¹ Yoder's criticism is summed up in "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 61-65.

contrast to H. Richard Niebuhr's contradiction-in-unity version of the Trinity, Yoder claims that his distinction-in-unity Trinitarianism is consistent with creedal orthodoxy.

The Creeds Are Relative / The Creeds, Our Relative

Yoder's criticism of H. Richard and others, as well as his frequent appeal to the creeds, appears to accredit those such as Carter, Nation, Slater, and Alain Epp Weaver, who claim that Yoder is consistent and compatible with creedal orthodoxy. If that was all that Yoder said about the matter, there would be no controversy regarding his relationship to the creeds. Yoder notes, however, that in his "Preface to Theology" course (materials from which have been posthumously published) he takes "a narrative and relativizing approach" to the development of early Christian dogma, especially the Christological creeds.²² He also highlights what he sees as political and procedural problems with the early Councils, especially Constantine's involvement in Nicea.²³ These statements appear to lend credence to those like Finger, who question Yoder's Christology, and those like Biesecker-Mast and Denny Weaver, who criticize rather than affirm Nicea and Chalcedon.

Given this ambivalence, the debate about Yoder's stance vis-à-vis the creeds continues unabated. Most scholars, however, jump to Yoder's view of the creeds rather than first asking several necessary and clarifying questions of Yoder: What is the nature and purpose of theological language? What is the authority of tradition within the Church? What is the proper procedure for resolving theological questions and issues that

²² Yoder, "That Household We Are," 9.

²³ Yoder, *Preface*, 197.

arise within the Church? What is the task of the theologian within the body of Christ? I explore two crucial elements of Yoder's thought that answer these questions and set the stage for his view of the creeds. First, I show that, for Yoder, the Gospel has been in translation from its inception. Second, I outline Yoder's view of the authority of tradition, including how important theological distinctions and formulations should be made and who should be involved in making them.

If the above questions are answered, we can see that Yoder both affirms and relativizes the creeds. Because they faithfully translate and articulate the old message of Scripture in a new day, the creeds should be affirmed.²⁴ Because they are not Scripture, they are relativized. The creeds are relativized because they are not masters but servants of the Word of God. Importantly, for Yoder (though perhaps not for others) "relativizing" the creeds does *not* mean dismissing or ignoring or denying them but recognizing their proper place as servants of the good news, heralds of the Gospel. Put differently, the *relativity* of the creeds means that they are *relatives* of Scripture, bearing a family resemblance. Just as children inherit family traits from their parents and re-assemble them in new ways, so the creeds inherit biblical thought and speech patterns and re-assemble them in new times and places to respond to new questions and to refute unfamiliar ways of proclaiming or translating the good news.

²⁴ I am playing off the title of Yoder's "As You Go: The Old Mission in a New Day," Focal Pamphlet No. 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961).

The Missionary Nature of the Gospel

The need to translate words and concepts from one thought world to another did not begin with colonialism, modernity, or globalization. From the first disciples of Jesus until the present day, Christians have perpetually faced this challenge and opportunity. For example, the early Christians had to ask how one proclaims the Gospel to those who are not Jews, who are not from the land of Palestine, and who have questions that were never posed to or about Jesus.²⁵ The proclamation of the Gospel, Yoder notes, has two key characteristics.²⁶ First, Christians think that what they believe is true, not just for them, but for all people. Second, Christians have been compelled to tell others about this truth. From the disciples in the first century to the missionaries who today depart from Grand Rapids to Guatemala or from Chile to Chicago, Christians engage other people who have completely different language games, thought worlds, and frames of reference.²⁷ This missionary task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus in new terms, times, and places is not a new challenge that arises in 325 A.D. It is already going on in the first century, in the missionary spread of the Gospel and in the very pages of Scripture. In the face of the perennial missionary task, Yoder's essay "But We Do See Jesus" notes that there are several responses one could take. If one thinks one has the truth but encounters a new and different thought world, what are the options? He lists and

²⁵ Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 50.

²⁶ Yoder, "That Household We Are," 2-3.

²⁷ One example is Don Richardson, who ministered to the Sawi. For this people group, deceit of a trusting friend was the most revered act one could achieve, thus complicating how they read the story of Jesus and Judas (Richardson, *Peace Child* [Glendale, Ca.: G/L Regal Books, 1974]).

rejects six, and then looks to Scripture for how properly to go about the missionary task of proclamation.

The first option is a defensive fidelity to one's particular truth.²⁸ Before encountering a different thought world, the particular truth one holds just seems "natural." But when confronted with new and different ideas, one's relation to one's truth claims is transformed. Rather than the truth simply being organic and natural (e.g., the subconscious awareness that "I believe this, my parents believe this, and so does most everyone else I know"), the truth claim now calls for defensiveness and suspicion toward those who might challenge it, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has taught college freshmen.

A second option, on the other end of the spectrum, is recantation of one's previous position and conversion to the wider thought world. Since the wider world seems to be larger and stronger, it is often thought to be truer. Those converts to the wider world often take up the task of the "enlightened pedagogue," the third option. These converts are convinced that rational argumentation can lead people from their original "smaller" thought world to the "larger" one.

The fourth option is the *apologia*. One does not renounce one's truth claims or roots in a "smaller" world, but rephrases that truth in a way that makes it commendable to the mainstream value system. This position accepts the wider world's way of saying things, and then tries to show how its minority position makes sense within that bigger logic. A fifth option constructs a new metalanguage, a linguistic artifice that would take

²⁸ The following paragraphs are a summary of Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 48-49.

us beyond all particularities of previous conversations so that we become the creators of the newest, widest world yet. A sixth option is a pluralistic humility. One keeps one's truth claim but does not take the stance of the defensive apologete or the converted, enlightened pedagogue. In other words, one alters what is typically meant by "truth" and instead opts for humility in the face of the incommensurability of the different truth claims generated by varying thought worlds.

All of these answers are unsatisfactory, Yoder argues, because they presume the priority and truth of the supposed "wider" world. In reality, however, that wider world is still another provincial way of speaking, thinking, and reasoning: "one adolescent's breath of fresh air is another's ghetto." So, the question still remains, "How can particular truths be proclaimed publicly?"²⁹ Scripture provides a model. Three examples will suffice.³⁰

In John 1, the author engages an audience for whom the *logos* is a key part of their understanding of reality. As a principle of order and rationality, the *logos*, for many thinkers, helped to bridge the gap between the eternal and the temporal. John could have put Jesus into the place pre-formed for him according to the logic of this worldview, but he did not. Instead, he breaks the rules of this cosmology by putting Jesus as *logos* both at the top of the cosmology—the *logos* is deity—and at the level of humanity—the *logos* became flesh, a scandalous claim to most hearers.

²⁹ Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 49.

³⁰ These three examples will be revisited in greater detail in the next chapter with a view toward exploring Yoder's high Christology and the relationship between Christ and creation.

A second example comes from Hebrews 1, in which there is a cosmological chain. God is at the top, with angels as messengers between heaven and earth. Humans are on the bottom, and priests are raised up to be mediators between earth and heaven. The author of Hebrews, however, does not place Jesus just below the angels, as the high priest or second Adam, but above them at the right hand of God. Importantly, this exaltation does not require the loss of his humanity since the exaltation is precisely because of his true humanity.

A third example is Colossians 1, which engages an audience who viewed the world as held together by a network of principalities and powers. One navigated this world with the aid of fasting, festivals, visions, and angel worship. The author of Colossians, rather than showing how Jesus can help his audience negotiate and manipulate the powers and principalities, argues instead that Jesus has broken their power. Jesus is not simply part of the cosmos but its Lord.³¹

Based on these biblical texts, Yoder notes six moves that the biblical writers make to communicate their particular gospel message to their audience.³²

1. The writer inhabits the new linguistic thought world, using its language and facing its questions.
2. Rather than fitting Jesus into the slots of that cosmology, the writer places Jesus above the cosmos as Lord.
3. There is often a focus on the rejection and suffering of Jesus. He is Lord precisely because of his obedient suffering, not in spite of it.
4. The audience is called to participate in the self-emptying, death, and resurrection of the Son by the grace of God.

³¹ Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 52.

³² Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 53.

5. Behind and enabling the cosmic victory of the Son stands a variety of explanations: preexistence, coessentiality with the Father, possession of the image of God, and the participation of the Son in creation and providence.
6. The writer and readers share by faith in the victory of Jesus: “We are his household” (Heb. 3:6).

Based on these observations, Yoder notes that the New Testament is missionary both in content and form:

A handful of messianic Jews, moving beyond the defenses of their somewhat separate society to attack the intellectual bastions of majority culture, refused to contextualize their message by clothing it in the categories the world held ready. Instead, they seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes, and turned the cosmology on its head, with Jesus both at the bottom, crucified as a common criminal, and at the top, preexistent Son and creator, and the church his instrument in today’s battle. It is not the world, culture, civilization, which is the definitional category, which the church comes along to join up with, approve, and embellish with some correctives and complements. The Rule of God is the basic category. The rebellious but already (in principle) defeated cosmos is being brought to its knees by the Lamb. The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides as it must with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades.³³

Here is the crucial point: Yoder is saying that translation of the good news of Jesus does not begin with the creeds in the fourth century because the *Bible itself* is a missionary book and Christianity has been a missionary faith *from the very beginning*.³⁴ The text of the New Testament itself shows how to report the story of Jesus as true for people who are not from the land of Palestine, who are not Jews, and who have questions that were never asked of Jesus.³⁵ There is not a “fall” from an original pristine, untranslated

³³ Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 54.

³⁴ Yoder, “The Authority of the Canon,” in *To Hear the Word*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 105. All future references are to this edition.

³⁵ Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 50.

(Jewish) message into some other, contaminated (Greek) language.³⁶ The good news of the Gospel is for all nations and has *always* been in translation, from the time of Christ until the present day. There was no time when it was not this way.

The Authority of Tradition

If Yoder was a precritical biblicist or a naïve restitutionist, we would expect him to take a solely negative stance toward the creeds as “human traditions.” If, on the other hand, Yoder held to a naïve view of the necessary progress of church history, we would expect him to rubber stamp the creeds without thinking too much about them. Yoder does neither and, instead, provides a nuanced view of the authority that tradition does and does not have.³⁷

For Yoder, the Bible and tradition can be distinguished. He is not, however, hermeneutically naïve; nor, he argues, is the Protestant tradition, including Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, and Calvin. Yoder willingly acknowledges that tradition and our hermeneutical matrices affect our reading of Scripture. He points out that the slogan “No creed but the Bible” is deceptive “if it is thought that in our own reading of the Bible we can avoid

³⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider note that Yoder occasionally draws a dichotomy between Jewish and Greek thought (“Introduction,” in *Preface*, 23), a dichotomy which oversimplifies the matter. A. James Reimer also notes this issue (Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology,” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* [Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001], 255). Several points mitigate their concerns. First, *Preface* is a course geared to seminary students, not professional historians. At some point, most course lectures oversimplify on some matters, and Yoder never reviewed *Preface* for scholarly publication. Second, as Hauerwas and Sider note, Yoder takes issue with the linguistically-naïve idea that certain languages (Hebrew or Greek) imply an inherent logic or worldview. As early as 1964, Yoder draws on James Barr to criticize this fallacy (Yoder, “The Message of the Bible on Its Own Terms,” in *To Hear the Word*, 169). Third, Yoder’s work as a whole, including “But We Do See Jesus,” makes it clear that one particular language or thought world is not somehow more “pure” or “pristine” than another.

³⁷ The following paragraphs summarize Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 66-72, and integrate his argument there with his remarks elsewhere on the subject.

having any grid, any internal canon, of our own.”³⁸ Indeed, Yoder contends that the best functional definition of fundamentalism is the refusal to acknowledge the “hermeneutic problem.”³⁹ Nevertheless, Scripture can never be completely conflated with our interpretation of it; we can never possess it in the sense of not needing to continually check our own gloss on the text by returning to the text itself.⁴⁰ Yoder uses the analogy of a microscope and microbe.⁴¹ The microbe can only be seen by using the microscope. The observer may even influence the microbe, dyeing it, putting it on a slide, even killing it, but that does not mean that the microscope becomes the microbe. Likewise, Yoder affirms that our reading of Scripture is always affected by prior interpretations in church history, contemporary concerns and priorities, and by our language and logic. Yet those realities do not make our interpretation of Scripture hopelessly subjective nor do they demand that the entire process of interpretation be controlled by a particular agent or office in the Church.

Rather, those realities necessitate that there should be people within the church who are “agents of linguistic self-consciousness” and that the members of the church engage in the continual process of interpreting Scripture with discernment.⁴² According

³⁸ Yoder, “Thinking Theologically from a Free-Church Perspective,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 256-257.

³⁹ Yoder, “Thinking Theologically from a Free-Church Perspective,” 257.

⁴⁰ Yoder, “‘There is a Whole New World’: The Apostle’s Apology Revisited,” in *To Hear the Word*, 4.

⁴¹ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 66.

⁴² Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 32.

to Yoder, these agents of linguistic self-consciousness, or teachers, have several duties. First, they must be aware of the fluid nature of language. This fluidity is why the book of James cautions against becoming a *didaskolos* (or teacher): “Language is unruly in that playing around with words or trying to be consistent in our use of words or dealing with issues by defining terms is a constant source of contestation and confusion.”⁴³ The teacher must be aware that words and concepts are not the same, that different people define and use words in different ways, and that words and their denotations and connotations change over time. Second, they must be aware of the language, concepts, and historical-cultural context of the original text. Although never leaving one’s subjectivity and own historical-cultural particularity behind, the teacher must endeavor to empathetically enter the world of Scripture and inquire about the original author, the original audience, and how this text would have been interpreted and understood in its original setting. Third, the teachers of the Church must be aware of the language, concepts, and historical-cultural setting of their own place and time. This does not mean that one can jump out of one’s own interpretive skin, but it does mean that one is linguistically self-conscious. As we know our own time and place, we also recognize that there are particular agendas and questions we bring to the text that other times and places did not bring.

A key example is the relation of the Bible to social and political issues. Whereas previous generations may not have asked these kinds of questions of the text, Yoder’s

⁴³ Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” in *To Hear the Word*, 82.

generation did.⁴⁴ For Yoder, asking questions of the text is not wrong, so long as we do not presume ahead of time either to know that the Bible addresses the issue or that it says what we want it to say. The *didaskolos* brings together these three duties, recognizing that the power of language is its vulnerability and that its vulnerability is its power. Consequently, because language and history inevitably flow on,⁴⁵ the real issue is not tradition versus Scripture, but faithful translation versus unfaithful translation.⁴⁶

Faithful interpretations and appropriations of Scripture can take a variety of shapes. Yoder calls this “fidelity without rigidity,”⁴⁷ a kind of change that is like “fecundation” and the “organic quality of growth from seed.”⁴⁸ We ought to expect a rich and complementary diversity across time and space. The church in North America can learn from the church in other parts of the world as their particular concerns and contexts bring to light things that those of us in North America might not otherwise see. Likewise, the contemporary church can learn much by listening to interpreters in other ages. An awareness of the concerns, challenges, and appropriations of Scripture in ages past helps prevent being completely subjected to one’s own time. The theologian also traces the organic continuity between the meaning of the Bible in its original context and our contemporary interpretation. For example, Yoder mentions the early development of what was later termed the quadriga: the distinction between the literal, allegorical, moral,

⁴⁴ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 71.

⁴⁵ Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” in *To Hear the Word*, 90.

⁴⁶ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 67, 69.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 10.

⁴⁸ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 67.

and anagogical meanings of Old Testament texts.⁴⁹ With precedent in the New Testament itself, this interpretive method both drew boundaries in order to prevent “fruitlessly speculative” allegorical readings and allowed for interpretations beyond the literal meaning of the original Old Testament text. A proper understanding of language and of context, however, suggests that if faithfulness means anything and is a real possibility, then unfaithfulness is a real possibility as well.

Infidelity to Scripture can happen in multiple ways, some worse than others. Sometimes unfaithfulness is unintentional, the result of linguistic or conceptual slippage over time.⁵⁰ For Yoder, this should not produce guilt but renewed attentiveness. At other times infidelity is more insidious: “We are not plagued merely by a hard-to-manage diversity, by a wealth of complementary variations on the same theme. We are faced with error, into which believers are seduced by evil powers seeking to corrupt the church and to disqualify her witness.”⁵¹ For Yoder, these are the types of “human traditions” criticized by Jesus in Matthew 15. The problem is not with tradition *per se*; it is that some Christians have invalidated the word of God for the sake of their tradition (Matt. 15:6). The agent of linguistic self-consciousness carries on the challenge of Jesus, in Matthew 15, to guard Scripture against those who appeal to its authority wrongly.⁵² For Yoder, if a theologian takes Scripture authoritatively, his or her primary task is not to abstractly defend Scripture’s authority to those who do not see it as such. Rather, the theologian’s

⁴⁹ Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” in *To Hear the Word*, 83.

⁵⁰ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 70.

⁵¹ Yoder, “The Authority of Tradition,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 69.

⁵² Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” in *To Hear the Word*, 83-84.

primary task is to guard against those who *do* believe in Scripture's authority but use that authority to back up bad interpretations and translations of Scripture's meaning.

The good news about our potential (and actual) unfaithfulness is that repentance is also a possibility. To make this point, Yoder compares the "wholesome growth of a tradition" to a vine.⁵³ A vine needs consistent pruning to provide a new chance for the roots to strengthen the whole vine and enable it to flourish. Likewise, any living tradition needs to be pruned on occasion in order to allow the roots a new chance to enliven the whole vine. Yoder underscores that this is not "primitivism" or an effort to regain some "pristine purity," as though time should not move. Instead, he sees it as a "looping back, a glance over the shoulder to enable a midcourse correction, a rediscovery of something from the past whose pertinence was not seen before."⁵⁴ The church continually goes back to Scripture so that it can faithfully go forward as it should, bearing witness to its Lord.

Here is the crucial point: as with translation, so this process of looping back, returning to the origins of the church in Jesus' own life, death, resurrection, and ascension is something that is already going on *in Scripture itself*.⁵⁵ Scripture is written by particular authors with particular agendas to particular audiences. Often the New Testament is polemically charged. In the decades immediately after Christ, the early church was already dealing with the issue of sorting faithful teaching and tradition from unfaithful. Thus, Yoder contends that there was no time when the Church was not already

⁵³ Yoder, "The Authority of Tradition," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 69.

⁵⁴ Yoder, "The Authority of Tradition," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 69. Cf. *Preface*, 179.

⁵⁵ Yoder, "The Authority of Tradition," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 70.

ecclesia reformata semper reformanda, looping back to its roots in Jesus in order to go forward faithfully.⁵⁶ This is not a process that began at some later date in church history, but an immediate, essential task of the Church from the very beginning.

One example of this looping back to go forward is found in Acts 15.⁵⁷ The confrontation regarding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the early church is produced by Paul's missionary methods, the experience of Peter and Cornelius, and the concerns that some Christians in Jerusalem had about these developments. The early church did not sidestep or ignore this issue, but confronted it directly. In doing so, those involved brought arguments from Scripture, shared their experiences, and listened to one another. As the people of God gathered together in open conversation, a consensus was reached. The church could say of that consensus that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). Importantly, in context of ecclesial conversation, the agents of linguistic self-consciousness do not stand alone or speak from an ivory tower, but bring one charisma among many to bear on the process, with confidence that God continues to direct his church as its members discern the way to faithfully speak and embody the old message in a new day.

Yoder's Assessment of the Creeds

With the preceding framework in place, Yoder's assessment of Nicea and Chalcedon, both positive and negative, can be better understood. They are relative

⁵⁶ Yoder, "The Authority of Tradition," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 70. The Latin phrase is often translated, "The church reformed, and always reforming."

⁵⁷ Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," in *To Hear the Word*, 91; cf. "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 33.

because they are not Scripture; they are our relatives because those involved in the formulation of the creeds did in their day what the New Testament writers did in the past and what we are trying to do in the present: faithfully testify in our language and culture to the truth of the Gospel. In order to understand Yoder's nuanced view, it is helpful to examine several things that the creeds are and are not.⁵⁸

What Nicea and Chalcedon Are Not

First, the councils that produced the creeds were not procedurally flawless.⁵⁹ The Acts 15 model of conversation and discernment is violated on two fronts. First, when the unbaptized Constantine called for the council of Nicea, it may be that his motives had more to do with his own political agenda and less to do with concern for the church coming to terms with its Christology.⁶⁰ Moreover, given that he was not baptized, his participation in the deliberations raises procedural questions. Second, the consequences for being on the wrong side of the debates of the fourth century were not merely ecclesial, but political.⁶¹ The decision reached by the church in Acts 15 had the force of the Spirit behind it, not the sword of the Emperor. That is a significant difference and one that changes the tone of conversation as well as the stakes involved. Having independence from the emperor means, for an Acts 15 model, greater procedural freedom

⁵⁸ When I speak of the "creeds" in this section, I mean to refer only to the Trinitarian and Christological formulas offered by Nicea and Chalcedon.

⁵⁹ For a personal testimony regarding the difficulties and futility of councils, see Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep. 130*, in *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337-461*, ed. J. Stevenson, new ed. rev. by W.H.C. Frend (Cambridge: SPCK, 1989), 118-119.

⁶⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 197.

⁶¹ Yoder, *Preface*, 199.

to seek the truth in conversation, which is why Yoder speaks approvingly of the critical leverage of some Arians and Nestorians over against the empire.⁶² If a group recognizes the need for independence of the church over against the political authorities, they are more in line with Scripture's prescription for ecclesial deliberations than a group that does not. For these reasons, Yoder argues that before simply accepting the doctrinal content of the creeds, we ought to think about the procedural authority of the councils.⁶³

Second, the creeds do not carry the same weight of authority as Scripture. For Yoder, there is a difference between the words of Scripture and our words as we exposit and reflect on Scripture.⁶⁴ If we accept the teaching of Scripture, the church has to find ways to sort out things that we hold based on the Bible: monotheism, the revelation of God in Jesus, and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ But there is a difference between the revelation given in Scripture and what happened at Nicea. For example, in the decades following 325 A.D., the Cappadocians helped to clarify (and establish the linguistic rules) that we ought to speak of three *hypostases* and one *ousia*. Obviously, we do not find those specific terms being used in this technical sense in Scripture. The

⁶² Yoder, *Preface*, 223. Lest this be taken as Yoder's sole thought on Arianism, he elsewhere makes clear that Arius had friends in high places, not least for the practical reason that "his theology fit the empire. If you lower your concept of Christ, then you can raise your vision of the emperor because the *Logos* was in both Jesus and the emperor...If Jesus is a little smaller, the king will be a little higher, and that is just what Constantine and his advisors wanted" (Yoder, *Preface*, 199).

⁶³ Yoder, *Preface*, 223.

⁶⁴ Because of this, Carter may overstate the matter when he says that "protecting, declaring, and unpacking the claims of classical Christology is what Yoder is about" (Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 17). It would technically be more accurate to say that protecting, declaring, and unpacking the Bible is what Yoder is about. Insofar as the creeds do this (and I will show that Yoder thinks they do), the basic impetus of Carter's point is right, if not quite as nuanced as it could be.

⁶⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

doctrine of the Trinity as formulated at Nicea is therefore not revelation, but our words that explain revelation. However necessary the creeds might be, Yoder argues that they must not be equated or conflated with Scripture itself. In addition, Yoder notes that the form of Scripture and the form of the creeds are different. The form of the Gospel proclamation is generally narrative, about both who Jesus is and what he does. Nicea and Chalcedon are philosophical and ontological summary statements about who Jesus is. Although Nicea records his birth, death, resurrection, and ascension, Yoder worries that later generations have taken this to imply that the kind of life Jesus lived was immaterial, not intimately connected with his death, resurrection, and ascension.⁶⁶

The creeds are not, thirdly, reasons to stop thinking and wrestling with the Bible's message in our own culture and historical context. In the fourth and fifth centuries, certain questions were generated and answered in the creeds. The questions and way of framing the problems arose out of that culture, language, and time. But we live in a different time and place, with different worldviews and language games. So, for example, as Denny Weaver reports, Yoder encouraged Weaver to think constructively about how to answer some of today's questions in today's language in a way that is consistent with and faithful to the Bible.⁶⁷ It seems to me that Yoder would not have taken this to be a radical or revolutionary idea, but simply an encouragement to do what any theologian should do: be faithful to Scripture and think carefully about what it has to say to our world today. As noted above, the missionary ought not capitulate to the logic of one's

⁶⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 220.

⁶⁷ J. Denny Weaver, "The John Howard Yoder Legacy: Whither the Second Generation?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (2003): 457.

time and culture but, following the pattern of Scripture itself, seek ways to transform and refashion the words and thought patterns of one's culture so that it is brought in line with Christ. There is no way to guarantee our faithfulness before embarking on this process, which is why the theology of the Cappadocians needed testing then, and why Denny Weaver's theology needs testing today (as Weaver himself recognizes).⁶⁸

Fourth, the creeds are not self-evident in a kind of a-historical, a-linguistic way. This truth is apparent in any undergraduate or seminary class that discusses the Trinity. For the debate to be comprehensible to English speakers, students must have a linguistic scorecard comparing Greek, Latin, and English, such as the one provided by Yoder in *Preface to Theology*.⁶⁹ The awareness of linguistic complexity enables us to bridge the distance from their time to ours and to understand why the Western church thought the East was in danger of tritheism and why the Eastern Church thought the West was in danger of Sabellianism. Even in the fourth and fifth century, it was not a simple matter of reading the Bible and recognizing that the Greek or Latin language had one word that obviously fit God's oneness and another that obviously fit his threeness. Moreover, Yoder points out that, as the Cappadocians worked the matter out, they took two words that were often used synonymously in Greek—*ousia* and *hypostasis*—and began to use them in a more technical way, self-consciously appropriating the words and giving them a nuance that they often did not have in the general vernacular.⁷⁰ There is nothing wrong

⁶⁸ J. Denny Weaver, "The John Howard Yoder Legacy," 458.

⁶⁹ Yoder, *Preface*, 200.

⁷⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 200-201.

with doing so, Yoder contends, so long as we realize that the formula eventually arrived at was *not* something that was simply self-evident in the language and the culture of that day or in ours. It took a good deal of work on linguistic and logical precision to make clear exactly what Trinitarian doctrine was saying and not saying. Thankfully, that is why the church has agents of linguistic self-consciousness.

Fifth and finally, the creeds are not necessary for ecumenical dialogue. Because Scripture, not the creeds, is the ultimate authority for Christians, Yoder argues that we do not need the creeds to talk to other Christians. For him, the Acts 15 model is sufficient. The basis for Christian unity is the work of Christ and the confidence that the Spirit continues to work as we gather around Scripture. The creeds signified that in the fourth and fifth centuries, but they do not bypass the need to continue that conversation today.

What Nicea And Chalcedon Are

If one focuses only on these five things that the creeds are *not*, one might be tempted to think Yoder's overall stance toward them is negative. But it is not. Despite these limitations, Yoder highlights five positive aspects of Nicea and Chalcedon that, in the end, outweigh the negatives.

First, the creeds are procedurally valid and acceptable. Nicea had flaws, which Yoder is quick to note. But Yoder also notes that it is valid, not because the emperor convened it or the bishops attended it, but because at Nicea the Church was doing what the Church had done in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15. They were talking about how

to affirm, in their language and culture, their commitment to God and to Jesus.⁷¹

Although there may have been “dirty politics” going on, Yoder does not embrace an absolute hermeneutic of suspicion toward the church fathers.⁷² In the care he shows toward explaining the different positions, Yoder honors the bishops and theologians who genuinely struggled with this question. They really were concerned with this issue *as a theological issue*, not simply using Nicea as a thinly-veiled mask for their will to power.⁷³ Moreover, Yoder is no perfectionist. If any church conversation had to be completely flawless with respect to procedure and motives, few or no decisions could be considered valid. Indeed, precisely because ulterior motives tend always to be in play, Yoder emphasizes dialogue and openness. The members of the church need to listen openly and talk openly with one another so that we can learn from and correct one another. The process of dialogical discernment is itself a spiritual discipline that helps lead us further along as individuals and as a community in the direction God desires. Although not flawless, the councils that produced the creeds are an example of this.

Second, the creeds are historically particular translations of the meaning of the Bible. What does Scripture demand we say? According to Yoder, several things:

⁷¹ Yoder, *Preface*, 205.

⁷² Michael Gorman is right to speak of Yoder’s hermeneutic of suspicion toward tradition, which is actually, Gorman notes, more properly a hermeneutic of trust in God and God’s Word to speak through Scripture beyond the ways we have heard God in the past. Gorman, “Foreword,” *To Hear the Word*, xiv. This hermeneutic of suspicion is not absolute because it is generated by Yoder’s assumption that fallible people are reading Scripture, and so we need to be aware of how that affects their interpretation. Importantly, fallibility is not to be equated with unadulterated malevolence.

⁷³ Unfortunately, some theologians and historians who are less careful than Yoder do not avoid a simplistic *DaVinci Code*-like interpretation of Nicea.

monotheism, distinctness of Father and Son, preexistence of the Son,⁷⁴ that Jesus is both human and Son of God,⁷⁵ that his work is the work of God and yet man,⁷⁶ that he is normative,⁷⁷ and that there is God the Father, Son, and Spirit.⁷⁸ The language of the creeds does not always repeat exactly the wording of Scripture. Instead, Nicea and Chalcedon employed ontological, philosophical language that was rooted in Greek thought. Some thinkers do not approve of this. Yoder notes that some criticize Nicea and Chalcedon because those creeds accept “Greek garb.”⁷⁹ Others criticize them because they are the product of verbal wrangling.⁸⁰ Still others criticize them because they employ language of ontology, not language of *agape*.⁸¹

Yoder explicitly rejects all three of these positions.⁸² What these criticisms get wrong is that rather than saying, “The creeds are a *bad* translation of Scripture’s meaning,” they say, “The creeds are a *translation* of Scripture’s meaning.” For Yoder, this difference is enormous. In his view, charging Greeks with employing “Greek garb” in their language is no criticism; it would be just as silly to expect them to wear three

⁷⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 191.

⁷⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 219.

⁷⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 201.

⁷⁷ Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

⁷⁸ Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

⁷⁹ Yoder, *Preface*, 219. Cf. Yoder, “That Household We Are,” 7.

⁸⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 202.

⁸¹ Yoder, *Preface*, 202.

⁸² This fact is not readily apparent in A. James Reimer’s portrayal of Yoder. For example, see Reimer, “The Yoder Legacy,” 11.

piece suits to the council of Nicea as it would be to expect them to employ the reasoning and language of contemporary thought: “It would have been the wrong question had the early Christians asked, ‘Shall messianic Jews enter the Hellenistic world and adjust to its concepts?’ Should Paul use Greek? The question was not whether to enter but how to *be* there: how in the transition to render anew the genuine pertinence of the proclamation of Christ’s Lordship, even in a context (*particularly* in a context) where even the notion of such sovereignty is questionable.”⁸³

Yoder would also concede that the creeds are the product of verbal wrangling, though he would not consider this a reproach because “words are the only tools you have to deal with truth. The problem was verbal in the first place.”⁸⁴ Yoder does not mean that the problem was *merely* “verbal,” in contrast to other problems regarding weighty and substantial matters. Rather, he is saying that the only way that humans can deal with questions about truth and reality is *through language*. In other words, it is no reproach to accuse those involved with the creeds as wrangling over words, because to wrestle with language is to attempt to properly portray the truth about reality, including the reality of God. Moreover, the creeds’ use of ontological language is not a problem in and of itself. The councils were addressing ontological questions, which would make it peculiar to use some other type of language. In addition, one should not construe language of ontology as incommensurable with language of *agape* because when Nicea states that the Son is

⁸³ Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 56.

⁸⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 202.

homoousios with the Father “this is an affirmation of love; this is the way to say ‘love’ in the language of ontology.”⁸⁵

Yoder therefore lists three mistakes that critics of Nicea and Chalcedon should *not* make:

1. Suggest that the missionary invasion of the Hellenistic semantic world, which led to such a ‘translation,’ could have been or should have been avoided by remaining ‘biblical’ in semantics or ontology.
2. Suggest that developments toward a ‘high’ Christology had not already begun within the apostolic canon itself.
3. Interpret such developments as intrinsically contradictory to the Jewish messianic message of the first generations.⁸⁶

Yoder is adamant about these points because critics who argue any of the above set themselves not only against the creeds, but *against the New Testament itself*. For Yoder, all three of these moves were already happening in the New Testament, centuries before the creeds were composed. Yoder accepts the translations of the creeds, at least in part,

⁸⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 202. This is a key difference between Yoder and J. Denny Weaver. Weaver criticizes Nicea and Chalcedon for using ontology language rather than telling the narrative of the Gospels, saying that “virtually nothing” in the creeds helps shape the church to witness to God’s kingdom. Weaver declares, “If all we know of Jesus is that he is ‘one substance with the Father,’ and that he is ‘fully God and fully man,’ there is nothing there that expresses the ethical dimension of being Christ-related (Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 93). There are two issues here. First, Weaver would have to do more work to spell out that his “if” is anything more than hypothetical. Who are those Christians who have only ever known those two propositions about Jesus? Second, Weaver surprisingly overlooks the interconnections between theology, ontology, and ethics. For example, both Yoder and the fifth century Church saw that Chalcedon has clear links to the life and ethics of the Christian. If Jesus really is “fully man,” then the ontological language of the creeds explodes into all arenas of theology and ethics that have implications for *our* humanity: soteriology, eschatology, politics, spiritual disciplines, and so on. Weaver backhandedly affirms the modern and Constantinian disjunction between theology and ethics by arguing that Chalcedon says virtually nothing about the reign of God or the shape of the church’s witness. Such a reading misunderstands what was at stake in the debate about Jesus’ true and full humanity. Yoder clearly understands these stakes, which is why he argues that his own theology takes Chalcedon with absolute seriousness.

⁸⁶ Yoder, “That Household We Are,” 7. It should be noted that the original context of this lecture is a conference on Believers Church Christology. With this in mind, it would appear that Yoder is working to help those in his own tradition see why many of their standard criticisms of creedal Christology would not apply.

because he accepts that the Gospel has been, from the beginning, in translation. The real question is not one of translation but of a faithful or unfaithful translation.

These comments make clear just what kind of “narrative and relativizing” approach Yoder takes to the creeds. There is a naïve type of historicism that would relativize the creeds because of a modern notion of “progress.” This naïve historicism understands well the historical embeddedness of the creeds but implicitly presumes that humanity has just lately uncovered the timeless, eternal truth whereby we judge other periods of history. In other words, naïve historicism points out the speck in the eye of past generations while ignoring the log of historical embeddedness in its own. Yoder is no naïve historicist. The questions, the language, and the historical context of Nicea and Chalcedon may not be our questions, our language, or our historical context, but that does not mean they are wrong, misguided, or problematic. It is not our time but Scripture that provides critical leverage over against *any* age. Though there are biblical grounds to criticize Nicea (e.g., the role of political coercion), non-biblical grounds of criticism appear, to Yoder, as mistakes committed by historicists who are not self-aware enough to turn their historicism back on their own time and thought.

Third, although the creeds are historically particular, they answer perennial questions that the church must face. The creeds are not the Bible, but they are generated and necessitated by the Bible: “The problem the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to resolve, the normativity of Jesus as he relates to the uniqueness of God, is a problem Christians will *always face* if they are Christian. The doctrine of the Trinity is a test of whether your commitments to Jesus and to God are biblical enough that you have the problem the

doctrine of the Trinity solves.”⁸⁷ One can dismiss the creeds by dismissing the world of the early church, including the philosophical and linguistic air they breathed, but that does not mean we can escape the issues that they were trying to clarify.⁸⁸ Why were the creeds needed? One potential answer is that to have a church there must be creeds and so we need to go to Scripture to piece together a creed. But that is historically backwards, Yoder notes.⁸⁹ As the early church read the Scriptures, questions inevitably arose. The church wanted to be faithful to the old message in a new day and to say in their time and place what needed to be said. That desire for faithfulness is what produced the creeds. Thus, the creeds are not a mechanism imposed externally on the church, but the organic result of what happens when the church reads the Bible, wants to understand it, and seeks to witness faithfully in its own time and place to who God is and what God has done. In this sense, if any church desires to be faithful to the God revealed in Scripture, it will inevitably find itself undertaking the same task as the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. Hence, Yoder argues that we need not fewer but more creeds and confessions: “The slogan [‘no creed but the Bible’] is deceptive if it is thought to mean that we can get along without postapostolic formulations...The polemic point is not that such formulations should not exist. It is probably better that there should be more of them. Neither the ancient ones of Nicea, Athanasius, Chalcedon nor the modern ones of Augsburg, Thirty-nine Articles, or the Westminster Confession should be a last word or a

⁸⁷ Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

⁸⁸ Yoder, *Preface*, 219.

⁸⁹ Yoder, *Preface*, 219. Both advocates and critics of the creeds sometimes commit this error.

filter between us and the Scriptures.”⁹⁰ In other words, the line between real faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the Gospel is not one that can be drawn in the fourth century, nevermore to be redrawn. Since infidelity is a constant threat, the church’s commitment to faithfulness must be as ongoing.

Fourth, the trinitarian and christological formulas offered at Nicea and Chalcedon are what the church *had* to say in its time in order to be faithful.⁹¹ They are not only historically particular, they are *faithful* in the midst of their historically particular situation.⁹² The historicist knife cuts both ways, for once one acknowledges that the Greeks had to speak Greek, then one must find ways within that thought world to say what must be said. Although noting the historical complexity of assessing the debates of the time, Yoder rejects Monarchianism, Arianism, Sabellianism, Docetism, and Ebionism as unsatisfactory and concludes that the creeds were what the church had to say to articulate successfully the message of the New Testament in a different thought world.⁹³ By “relativizing,” Yoder does *not* mean that one could be Arian or Docetic and still be

⁹⁰ Yoder, “Thinking Theologically from a Free-Church Perspective,” 256.

⁹¹ Yoder does not think that all creeds and confessions will necessarily be faithful. Moreover, he does not comment on the other canons or anathemas offered by Nicea and Chalcedon, other than simply listing the canons of the council of Nicea (Yoder, *Preface*, 208-209). His focus is solely on the trinitarian and christological teachings offered at the councils. To my knowledge, he does not analyze the other ecumenical councils, nor does he pass judgment regarding many later confessions.

⁹² Here J. Denny Weaver is similar and dissimilar to Yoder. Weaver does acknowledge that “if one assumes their world view and frame of reference, and if one is asking the specific question that they answer, then their answer is probably the best answer in that context. However, being right in those particular circumstances does not make them a general, required touchstone of all future christological thought” (“The United States Shape of Mennonite Theologizing, 640, n. 17). One reply might be, “It couldn’t hurt,” as Yoder notes that Anabaptists should probably have no interest in fighting against the creeds (*Preface*, 223). But Weaver’s arguments elsewhere that the creeds are necessarily connected to violence makes it seem as though he thinks *true* faithfulness to the Gospel was not in fact an option for the Councils but that the creedal path was the lesser of (at least) two evils.

⁹³ Yoder, *Preface*, 201.

faithful to the Bible's meaning. Moreover, Yoder does not make the case that there are a host of other *ontological* ways to say what the creeds say. Though this does not preclude the possibility of doing so, it does indicate that, to this point in history, we have few if any examples. The one exception Yoder notes is the question raised by Karl Barth and Gordon Kaufman about the ancient and modern meanings of "person," although he simply flags this issue rather than dealing with it in depth.⁹⁴ Hence, if you are going to speak the language of ontology, Yoder himself provides no better way to affirm what needs to be said than Nicea and Chalcedon.

Finally, although I stated above that the creeds are not ecumenically necessary, there is another sense in which the creeds are, for Yoder, ecumenically necessary. Yoder contends that the Bible, not the creeds, provides the ultimate basis for Christians reasoning with one another. But because he takes history seriously and because the path of faithful proclamation about who God is passes through the creeds, he refuses to simply discard Nicea and Chalcedon. This explains in part why Yoder repeatedly references Nicea and Chalcedon in his writings: not just as a bit of rhetorical trickery to confuse those who are creedally orthodox into buying into his ethics, but because Nicea and Chalcedon are faithful translations of biblical language and thought patterns and, as such, provide a touchstone between Yoder and other non-Mennonite Christians. There is a marked contrast between doing something *different* that *complements* or *extrapolates* the creeds and doing something that is *at odds with* and *contradicts* the creeds. Yoder may do the former, but he would disavow the latter. Nicea and Chalcedon want to be faithful to

⁹⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 203.

Scripture; so does Yoder. Yoder takes the divinity of Jesus seriously; so does Nicea. Yoder takes the humanity of Jesus seriously; so does Chalcedon. This is why Yoder essentially says, “If you believe the Bible and take the creeds seriously, my arguments ought to make sense.”⁹⁵ Although Christians may criticize Nicea and Chalcedon, Yoder would caution that we must vigilantly examine our own translation of the Gospel “with the same commitment to the man Jesus, and the same commitment to the unique God that they [the Councils] had, or else we shall have left the Christian family.”⁹⁶

Conclusion

Yoder’s Anabaptism does not prevent him from affirming the ecumenical creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. Yoder’s historicism does not prevent him from recognizing the validity of ontological language. Yoder’s anti-Constantinianism does not prevent him from recognizing the truth of the teachings of the creeds, no matter how procedurally flawed the Councils may have been. Yoder’s view of the nature of theological language and the authority of tradition positioned him to see the relatedness of the creeds to Scripture. Just as the New Testament itself is already a work of missionary translation that points to the work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so Nicea and Chalcedon are a work of missionary translation that points to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These creeds are relative in that they are *not* Scripture, but they are most certainly relatives of

⁹⁵ Again, this contrasts with J. Denny Weaver’s approach, which is to pit Anabaptist theology *against* “violence-accommodating” Nicea and Chalcedon (*Nonviolent Atonement*, 98). Weaver essentially says, “If you believe the Bible and my argument, you probably will not take the creeds seriously.” In other words, one must be either a Mennonite or a creedal Christian. Yoder never depicted the matter this way.

⁹⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

Scripture. Their meaning and proclamation are faithful only insofar as they are akin to what we find in the text of the Bible.⁹⁷

Having cleared one potential objection to seeing Yoder as presenting a Trinitarian theology of culture that upholds the continuity between creation and redemption, it is necessary to examine in more detail the content of Yoder's Christology. There we see the hermeneutical key to Yoder's Trinitarian theology of culture—a key that clarifies the way that creation, culture and, indeed, all things hold together in Christ.

⁹⁷ This appears to be Yoder's main criteria in discerning which creeds the church should accept and reject, though he does not specifically mention any particular creeds or confessions that should be rejected. If a creed or confession is a faithful missionary translation of Scripture, then it is acceptable. This means we properly understand both the host and receptor cultures. Thus, we must pay close attention to the original context of both Scripture and the creeds, something that Yoder's account in *Preface* exhibits inasmuch as it charts both the meaning of the biblical texts in their original contexts, as well as the intellectual, historical, and linguistic factors shaping the debates surrounding Nicea and Chalcedon. This also means that the church continually needs to produce new creeds and confessions in the face of various challenges to the gospel.

CHAPTER 4: YODER'S NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTOLOGY

Problematic theological and ethical paradigms often generate the wrong questions, including “How do Christ and culture relate?” or “How do creation and redemption relate?”¹ According to Yoder, these questions often reveal an insufficiently biblical view of Jesus, culture, creation, and redemption. This chapter sets forth what I argue is Yoder's biblically-grounded Christology, which holds that in his humanity and his divinity Jesus not only relates directly to culture, but also serves as the linchpin for creation and redemption's coherence. In what follows, I first contend that Yoder's exegesis helpfully shows how, as a fully human Jewish person, Jesus directly addresses culture, politics, economics, and other questions of social ethics. Next, I outline how Yoder rightly argues that, as fully divine, Jesus creates, sustains, and directs all things and, in him, all things hold together. Finally, I present several theological and ethical implications of Yoder's biblically-grounded Christology.

¹ This is not to say that these are bad questions in and of themselves. Yoder's point is that questions become systemic problems for thinkers precisely because too little attention is paid to biblical texts that could possibly resolve these questions. For one reason or another, though, the relevant texts are ignored or downplayed. Yoder addresses questions like these in a variety of places, including “Creation and Gospel,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3, no. 8 (Oct. 1988): 8-10; “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 61-62; “Reformed versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology,” *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May-June 1985): 5-6; “That Household We Are,” (unpublished address, Believers Church Conference on “Is There a Believers' Church Christology?” Bluffton, OH, Oct. 23-25, 1980), 8.

The Humanity of Jesus: Messiah and Culture

“At no point was [Christianity] directly concerned with the social upheavals of the ancient world...The central problem [of the New Testament] is always purely religious, dealing with such questions as the salvation of the soul, monotheism, life after death, purity of worship, the right kind of congregational organization, the application of Christian ideals to daily life, and the need for severe self-discipline in the interests of personal holiness.”² This assertion of Ernst Troeltsch articulates a position prevalent in North American Christianity both in 1972 when Yoder wrote *Politics of Jesus* and today. This view sees Jesus as a religious savior, but not someone who addresses key cultural questions concerning power, politics, wealth, decision making, and so on. Yoder addresses Christians who hold this view in *Politics*, in which Yoder’s core argument is that Jesus did not point away from public issues but instead offered “one particular social-political-ethical option.”³ Moreover, Yoder argues that because Jesus is fully human, the real question is not *how* Christ and culture relate, but *whether*, when we see that Christ has something particular to say about culture, we respond in obedience or rebellion.

On this score, I recommend a simple linguistic move not made by Yoder, but in the spirit of Yoder’s project. Rather than speaking of Christ and culture, we ought to speak of the Messiah and culture.⁴ “Messiah” is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word

² Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. (1931; repr., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 1:39.

³ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 11.

⁴ I recognize this does not have the nice alliteration of Christ and culture.

transliterated “Christ.” Both Messiah and Christ refer to the “Anointed One,” so they are semantic equivalents. Many Christians today, however, have forgotten the way in which the term “Messiah” would have underscored Jesus’ Jewish humanness, because they hear “Christ” as a reference to Jesus’ divinity or to the exalted Christ. This is not wrong, but it is not the whole picture. This simple move brings Jesus’ Jewishness to the forefront, thereby altering the tone of discussion surrounding questions of “Christ and culture.”

Before moving on, we must address A. James Reimer’s concern that Yoder’s focus on the “ethical-political” aspect of Jesus’ work eclipses the “mystical, spiritual, and sacramental” aspects.⁵ Though Reimer is right to note that Yoder often focuses on the political, he is wrong to deduce that Yoder intended such focus to be exclusive or normative. Yoder states that he is not trying to address all things that could be said of Christ or to imply that a broader or different focus is inherently problematic; he is trying to rectify an omission:

My presentation, in order to correct for the one-sided social ethic which has been dominant in the past, emphasizes what was denied before: Jesus as teacher and example, not only as sacrifice; God as the shaker of the foundations, not only as guarantor of the orders of creation; faith as discipleship, not only as subjectivity. The element of debate in the presentation may make it seem that the “other” or “traditional” element in each case – Jesus as sacrifice, God as creator, faith as subjectivity – is being rejected. It should therefore be restated that – as perusal of the structure of our presentation will confirm – no such disjunction is intended. I am rather defending the New Testament against the exclusion of the “messianic” element. The disjunction must be laid to the account of the traditional view, not of mine. It is those other views that say that because Jesus is seen as sacrifice he may

⁵ A. James Reimer, “Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 16 (Spr. 1998): 12. Cf. Craig A. Carter’s treatment of charges of reductionism in *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 126-136.

not be seen as sovereign, or that because he is seen as Word made flesh he cannot be seen as normative person.⁶

In the 1994 epilogue to this chapter, Yoder notes that this paragraph might have been better placed in a more prominent position in the book, since many of his critics either missed it or “did not believe it,” as he puts it.⁷

It is worth remembering that the focus of much of Yoder’s corpus was, after all, on the politics of Jesus. In the nearly four decades since the first publication of *Politics*, many of Yoder’s main points have become commonplace in the field of biblical studies, making it easy to forget how many of Yoder’s basic points were, in 1972, on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship and therefore necessary to emphasize, especially in conversation with ethicists, most of whom had not yet taken notice of the developments.⁸ Moreover, if one judged that the social, cultural, and political aspects of Jesus had been underplayed for most of Christian history, one might respond by largely attending to that which had been unduly underemphasized. If one wants to get the mystical, spiritual, and sacramental aspects of both Jesus and the Christian faith, there are countless sources to which one can go. Yoder did not seek to discount that endeavor as illegitimate but to shed

⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 226.

⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 227. Mark Thiessen Nation echoes Yoder’s own sentiment, noting that the charge of reductionism cannot be maintained: “I can only imagine that various theologians, apparently with their own agendas, believe that Yoder is here being disingenuous. That is to say, perhaps they believe he *only* says this to keep orthodox Christians with him in his argument. However, this cynical view is difficult to sustain if someone knows and is honest about a broad range of Yoder’s writings.” Nation, “Mending Fences and Finding Grace: Regarding Christology and Divine Agency in Yoder’s Thought,” (paper presented at the conference “Inheriting John Howard Yoder,” Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, May 25-26, 2007), <http://www.emu.edu/seminary/resources/christologymtn.html> (accessed December 29, 2009).

⁸ Richard Hays speaks highly of Yoder’s exegesis in *Politics*, stating that “at numerous points, his readings reflect an astute—indeed, almost prescient—grasp of important developments in the field of New Testament studies.” Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 245.

light on those aspects that had been marginalized and ignored, including the Jewishness of Jesus.⁹

Jesus the Jew

For Yoder, conversations about Messiah and culture should begin with the Old Testament's portrayal of Israel as the covenant people of God. Christian thinkers make a critical error when they forget that Jesus was a Jewish man, fully embedded in his time, history, and society. Indeed, for Yoder, the problem with many interpretations of Jesus is that they willfully ignore or simply set aside as irrelevant his Jewishness and all that it implies for his ministry and teaching.¹⁰ When Jesus' Jewishness is ignored, it is possible to construe him in a variety of ways, such as a mendicant sage, a preacher of ahistorical individualism, a radical monotheist, the necessary sacrifice for human sin and indebtedness to God, or the founder of a new world religion.¹¹ These views share a common inattention to the embeddedness of Jesus within the context of first century

⁹ Despite this emphasis on Jesus' Jewishness, some scholars accuse Yoder of Marcionitic tendencies, including John W. Miller, "In the Footsteps of Marcion: Notes Toward and Understanding of John Yoder's Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 2 (1998): 82-92, and A. James Reimer, "I Came not to Abolish the Law but Fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 251. Several other Yoder commentators disagree vociferously with the characterization of Yoder as Marcionitic, including Craig A. Carter, *Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 50-51; Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114, n. 18; John C. Nugent, "Old Testament Contributions to Ecclesiology: Engaging and Extending the Insights of John Howard Yoder," (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2009), 149-152; and Alain Epp Weaver, "On Exile: Yoder, Said, and a Theology of Land and Return," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 181, n. 17.

¹⁰ For example, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 3. H. Richard states that "instead of reforming culture he ignored it," and approvingly cites Joseph Klausner, who states, "Jesus ignored everything concerned with material civilization."

¹¹ See Yoder, *Politics*, 6-8, for a list of reasons Jesus is set aside as irrelevant to social ethics.

Judaism. So Yoder declares: “the idea of Jesus as an individualist or a teacher of radical personalism could arise only in the (Protestant, post-Pietist, rationalist) context that it did; that is, in a context which, if not intentionally anti-Semitic, was at least sweepingly a-Semitic, stranger to the Jewish Jesus.”¹² In order to avoid this mistake, Yoder emphasizes two points that are foundational to the question of how Christ, in his full humanity, relates to culture: continuity between Old and New Testaments and the purpose of Israel’s calling. Moreover, Jubilee and wars of Yahweh provide test cases whereby we can see the two above points played out in concrete ways.

Continuity and Calling

First, along with co-author Richard Mouw, Yoder emphasizes the promise-fulfillment relationship between both the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the Church.¹³ The Church should therefore be seen as a “theocratic community” that is “the fulfillment of the promises given to Israel.”¹⁴ Despite perceived differences between Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, Mouw and Yoder point to a deep similarity between them, in that they see God’s work in both Old and New Testaments as directly relevant to the cultural and political life of humanity. Against dispensationalists, the political promises given to Israel are indeed seen as fulfilled in the New Testament; against Lutherans, there are not two different sets of norms for human community, but

¹² Yoder, *Politics*, 109. In the 1994 edition, Yoder notes interpretation of Paul has also fallen prey to an anti-Jewish bias (*Politics*, 227).

¹³ Richard J. Mouw and Yoder, “Evangelical Ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (Fall 1989): 132. Mouw and Yoder see this as a point of similarity between the Mennonite and Calvinist traditions.

¹⁴ Mouw and Yoder, “Evangelical Ethics,” 132.

one.¹⁵ Broadly conceived, then, the New Testament is the organic extension of the Old. If the Old Testament cares about disparate issues such as land use, humane treatment of animals, fairness in economic dealings, sexual conduct, and political power, then we should not expect that Jesus or the New Testament is exclusively concerned with the salvation of individual souls. The God who created all things is interested in the redemption of all things, in both Testaments.

Second, the backdrop to the question of Messiah and culture is informed by the purpose for which God called Israel in the Old Testament: to be a blessing and light to all nations in their communal and cultural life together (Genesis 12:1-3). Election, for Yoder, is tied to mission. God does not call Abraham simply to bless him, but to commission him and his family to be a blessing to all peoples inasmuch as they love God and love their neighbors as they ought. Crucially, this mission is a corporate and communal one. Israel's life together (and subsequently, the Church's life together) should not be construed simply as an aggregate of individuals in personal relationships with God.¹⁶ Rather, in Exodus 19, the people of Israel are set apart as a priestly kingdom.¹⁷ The priesthood of Israel was not merely the priesthood of one tribe, the Levites, nor was it simply a cultic priesthood. As the entire people of Israel lived out their life together,

¹⁵ Mouw and Yoder, "Evangelical Ethics," 133.

¹⁶ Mouw and Yoder emphasize this point with respect to the Church, again seeing it as a point of similarity between Anabaptist and Reformed communities. Cf. Mouw and Yoder, "Evangelical Ethics," 133. See also Yoder, "A Light to the Nations," *Concern* 9 (Mar. 1961): 14-18.

¹⁷ Yoder references this text as one of Israel's charter texts in "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 39. Exodus 19:6 also serves as the basis for Yoder's book title *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

from Sabbath observance to sacrifices to social justice, they were priestly representatives of God's ways to the rest of the world. The Torah, which addresses all these matters, is "grace and liberation" in that it reveals God's will for a vast spectrum of human life.¹⁸ Consequently, God's covenant purposes in calling Abraham are inherently social, political, and cultural.

For Yoder, the transition from the Old to New Testament is not a move from law to grace, but from grace to grace.¹⁹ That is, the gracious gift of Torah is exceeded by the gracious gift of Christ, who is the fulfillment of Torah, and the Spirit, who is the seal of the New Covenant which frees us to obey the central meaning of Torah: love of God and neighbor.²⁰ Yoder points out that Jesus does not rescind the central commands of the Old Testament, but he actually sharpens and deepens them.²¹ This should not be taken as a new legalism but as true freedom; for what could be more freeing than living out God's intentions for human life?²² When Jesus comes as the Messiah of Israel and as the *telos* of

¹⁸ Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 46.

¹⁹ In a cryptic yet pregnant comment, Yoder states, "The sixteenth century made *law* an issue in a way that predisposes us to be unfair to much that went before." Yoder, "Gospel Renewal and the Roots of Nonviolence," in *The War of the Lamb*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 49. Cf. Yoder, "The Hilltop City," in *He Came Preaching Peace: Bible Lectures on Peacemaking* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 102.

²⁰ Jeremiah 31:33.

²¹ Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 70; and "Gospel Renewal and the Roots of Nonviolence," in *War of the Lamb*, 49.

²² Cf. Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 61. Yoder elsewhere makes the point that God does not simply free his people *from* something, but *for* something. So, Sinai follows Exodus. Yoder is therefore suspicious of any theology, liberation or otherwise, that makes an undefined "freedom" or "liberation" the ultimate goal. Yoder, "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 304.

Torah, he comes with a social agenda that is “as broad as the entire Torah,”²³ representing a “paradigm of renewal taking up into itself all of the concreteness of the deuteronomic vision of faithful community under God.”²⁴ For Yoder, whatever is happening in the New Testament ought to be understood in connection with God’s intentions in the Old Testament, and this includes the whole spectrum of social, political, and cultural issues dealt with in Torah. When the Messiah comes, he comes to a people who see their social, political, and cultural life not as extraneous but as essential to their covenant relationship with God.

Jubilee and the Wars of YHWH

It hardly needs to be said that a straightforward reading of the Old Testament leaves no doubts that Israel’s God is concerned with social, economic, and political practices. What does need to be said, according to Yoder, is that when the Messiah comes, he will address these concerns. Yoder wrote extensively regarding the Old Testament.²⁵ In particular, two practices he addresses—Jubilee and holy war—helpfully

²³ Yoder, “Jesus: A Model of Radical Political Action,” in *War of the Lamb*, 78.

²⁴ Yoder, “The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King,” in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 141-142.

²⁵ Cf. Yoder, “Against the Death Penalty,” in H. Wayne House and Yoder, *The Death Penalty Debate* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 119-132; “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003); “Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology,” *Grail* (Sept 1985): 55-74; “Creation and Gospel,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3 (Oct 1988): 8-10; “Exodus: Probing the Meaning of Liberation,” *Sojourners* 5 (S 1976): 26-29; “Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation,” *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (1973): 297-309; “God will Fight for Us,” in *Politics*, 76-88; “The Hilltop City,” “Turn, Turn,” and “The Voice of your Brother’s Blood,” in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); “If Abraham Is Our Father,” in *Original Revolution* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 91-112; “Introduction” to Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 17-19; “Jesus the Jewish Pacifist” and “See How They Go with Their

illustrate that the God of Israel is directly concerned with matters of culture and society.

Moreover, Israel's prophets directly connect the messianic era to these two concerns.

With respect to Jubilee, Isaiah 49:8-9 states, "Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear'" (ESV).²⁶

With respect to concerns of war and conquest, Zechariah 9:9-10 states,

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."

Jesus spoke and ministered in a context where concerns like these (and these exact concerns) would have been prevalent. When the Messiah comes, he will have to address these expectations.

The practice of Jubilee, as outlined in Leviticus 25, included at least four key practices.²⁷ First, the year of Jubilee entailed a Sabbath year for the land. The people

Face to the Sun," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); "Meaning after Babel: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, vol. 1 (1996): 125-139; "On Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1992): 56-62; "Texts that Serve or Texts that Summon: A Response to Michael Walzer," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20 (Fall 1992): 229-234; "'Thou Shalt Not Kill' (Exodus 20:13)," in *To Hear the Word*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 38-48; and "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (1989): 545-562.

²⁶ See also Isaiah 61:1-2.

²⁷ Yoder looks for allusions to the year of Jubilee in the Gospels in "The Implications of the Jubilee," chapter 5 of *Politics*. I examine Yoder's argument below. My concern in the following paragraphs is simply to state the practices outlined in Leviticus 25 without asking if or how it is referenced in the Gospels.

could eat the produce of the field, but they were commanded to neither sow nor reap. If the people kept God's statutes, God promises his blessing upon them in the sixth year so that they will be sustained through the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:20-22). Second, the year of Jubilee included remission of debts. When someone sells their land or themselves into indentured servitude in order to pay off a debt, that debt should be forgiven in the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:28, 40). This forgiveness of debts leads to the next two practices. A third facet of Jubilee was the liberation of servants. For those who have sold themselves as servants to the fellow Israelites and cannot afford to redeem themselves or have a family member redeem them, the year of Jubilee is a year of release (Lev. 25:39-43).

Importantly, in the midst of this practice, God wants the people to recognize that *all* people of Israel are *his* servants. Even if they are in debt, they are to be recognized as ultimately *his* people. This is what Pharaoh failed to see. Servitude and indebtedness are not to be absolute characteristics of Israel's society, but relative practices that get readjusted at least every fifty years. A fourth and final practice of Jubilee is the redistribution of land (Lev. 25:23-34). The land is ultimately God's land, not the peoples'. Therefore, when the land is sold to pay off debt, this is never a final sale, but a temporary one. In the year of Jubilee, the land goes back to the original family and tribe. This ensures that the people of Israel are not dispossessed of their inheritance by their own brothers.

The prescriptions for the year of Jubilee make it clear that God is concerned with the social and economic organization of the people of Israel. Their care of the land is his concern. The Sabbath year not only allows the land to rest, it also gives the people the

opportunity to show that their economic life is sustained by neither greed nor the drive to survive, but by a fundamental trust that their God will provide for their needs. In the remission of debts, liberation of servants, and redistribution of property, God has provided a way for Israelite society to make relative economic adjustments every fifty years. This prevents a scenario where some families or tribes become perpetual servants and others become perpetual masters. The people own neither their land nor their servants absolutely, since both the people and the land are God's. The God of the year of Jubilee is a God who is concerned with the mundane matters of land, work, debt, and remission of debts.

A second practice of Israel was that of the wars of YHWH.²⁸ Rather than being embarrassed about the reality of Israel's wars, Yoder pays close attention to the text of Scripture in order to give a thick description of that practice and place it in the overarching narrative of Scripture.²⁹ When looking at the wars of YHWH, Yoder is keen to avoid both a narrowly legalistic focus on war as well as a sharp dualism between Old

²⁸ Yoder refers to this phenomena both by its designation from the social sciences—holy war—and its designation from the guild of biblical studies—wars of YHWH. He indicates that he prefers the latter in “Jesus the Jewish Pacifist,” in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 88, n. 10. Yoder addresses holy war in “If Abraham is Our Father,” in *Original Revolution*, 91-110; “‘To Your Tents, O Israel’: The Legacy of Israel’s Experience with Holy War,” 345-362; “Texts that Serve or Texts that Summon? A Response to Michael Walzer,” 229-234; “Is Not His Word Like a Fire? The Bible and Civil Turmoil,” in *For the Nations*, 85-86; and “From the Wars of Joshua to Jewish Pacifism,” in *The War of the Lamb*, 67-76. My intent is not to exhaustively explain Yoder’s stance on these wars, but simply to exhibit Yoder’s point that God was concerned about if, when, and how Israel fought. For an exposition of these wars in context of Yoder’s overall Old Testament narration, see Nugent, “Old Testament Contributions to Ecclesiology.”

²⁹ Yoder, “Texts that Serve,” 233. Yoder calls this the “cultic density of ancient semitic experience” which, he notes, “is something deeper than the components which we can make contemporaneously comprehensible in terms of the politics of nation building or the ethics of bloodshed.”

and New Testament ethics.³⁰ Although other pacifists may make this move, Yoder recounts the outcome of this view, which he wants to avoid:

One way is to say that we stand simply with Jesus, and that in rejecting the warlike dimensions of the Old Testament we radically relativize all of the Hebrew backgrounds of the Christian faith. Then we have a smaller Bible, and we shall be permanently embarrassed by the fact that the New Testament itself generally assumes rather than rejects the authority of the Old. More recent experience has taught us as well that such an attitude can fit into an unevangelical anti-Semitism.³¹

In contrast to this approach, Yoder focuses on continuities and developments within the trajectory of the biblical narrative as it moves from Old to New Testament.³² The appropriate way to address the question of the wars of YHWH is to attempt to understand them on their own terms, without twenty-first century questions and concerns interposed on the text. The first task is not to let our categories judge Scripture, but to let Scripture inform and shape our categories of thinking. When we do this we see, at the very least, God's attention to if, how, and when Israel takes up arms. This care shows that God is concerned with Israel's political and military situation.

The wars of YHWH are characterized by six marks, which Yoder lists:³³

1. The people were mustered by the sound of the trumpet. There was no standing army, no professional military class. There were in Israel no soldiering skills; only a volunteer militia. In some cases (Gideon, for example) the combatants might be very few.
2. "The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to JHWH for destruction" (Josh. 6:17). To "devote to destruction" (the root use of *herem*) is first a cultic event,

³⁰ Yoder, "From the Wars of Joshua to Jewish Pacifism," in *War of the Lamb*, 68. He lists Tolstoy and Petr Chelčický as representatives of this dualism.

³¹ Yoder, "From the Wars of Joshua to Jewish Pacifism," in *War of the Lamb*, 68.

³² Yoder, "If Abraham is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 105.

³³ The following list is quoted directly from Yoder, "Texts that Serve," 232-233.

invoking or ascribing the status of tabu, whereby the lives and goods in question become the property of the deity. It is this ceremonial consecration, occurring before the battle, which we cannot understand if we modernize the cultic dimension out of the story.

3. The assembled warriors are called on to trust JHWH as the real actor in the event, who will only act on their behalf if they trust him. Then they go into battle in the confidence that God will “give the enemy into your hand.”
4. Then God does give the victory. The enemy panics and usually flees. Sometimes the Israelites participate in the bloodshed of mopping up, sometimes not.
5. Then the sacrifice, which had been promised before the battle, is consummated by the destruction of (some or all of) the lives and goods of the enemy. Obviously what there was there to be destroyed would vary enormously, as “the enemy” was sometimes a fortified city, sometimes an armed camp, sometimes a bedouin village.
6. Then the event ended with a divine demobilisation: “To thy tents, O Israel.”

The central point behind the wars of YHWH (which are very different from the later wars of Israel’s monarchy) is found in Exodus 14:13: stand firm and see the salvation of YHWH, because YHWH will fight for you. This motif is central to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the wars of Joshua, and the miraculous deliverances in the time of the Judges. It can also be seen in the time of the monarchy with Asa (2 Chron. 14), Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20), and Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32). Ezra exhibits the same posture of trust in God when he refuses to accept Artaxerxes’ horses and soldiers as a protective consort for those returning to Jerusalem (Ezra 8).³⁴ Other facets of Israel’s narrative also serve to reinforce the need to trust God for their survival, including Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22),³⁵ Abraham’s relinquishing of better land to Lot

³⁴ All these examples are noted by Yoder in *Politics*, 77-84.

³⁵ Yoder, “If Abraham Is Our Father,” in *Original Revolution*, 101-102.

(Gen. 13), Isaac's relinquishing his wells to Abimelech (Gen. 26), and the stories of Joseph and Daniel.³⁶

The wars of YHWH serve to clarify what it means for God to call his people to have faith in God's covenant promises. Although it would be proper to count faith as a "religious" posture that the people should possess, Israel's faith is simultaneously a "political" posture:

Faith or *emunah* — a near synonym of trust, *batach* — is a politically, even militarily, operative quality or activity. "To believe" is not primarily to assent to propositions about the divine being, or about some state of affairs, or about anything. Nor is it merely inward attitude. "To believe" is to be ready to risk one's survival, to wager one's dignity or one's identity on the confidence that YHWH will intervene in one's favour. "To believe" is to risk one's well-being on the hypothesis that right behaviour will be "with the grain" of the cosmos, despite appearances.³⁷

Yoder's point is that faith and unbelief necessarily manifest themselves in differing stances toward military might and action. Faith in God's faithfulness to his covenant promises is seen in Joshua's victory at Jericho, Gideon's defeat of the Midianites, and Hezekiah's deliverance from the Assyrians. Disbelief toward God's covenant promises is seen not only in pagan cultic practices, but in Israel's reliance on pagan military practices and alliances to ensure their survival. "The just shall live by faith" is, after all, not first a statement about the salvation of individual souls, but about the posture God's people

³⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 84.

³⁷ Yoder, "To Your Tents, O Israel," 350. Cf. Yoder, *Politics*, 125, n. 31: "When the author [of Hebrews 11] defines 'faith' as assurance of the hoped-for and conviction of the unseen, the 'hoped-for' and 'unseen' realities are not some otherwise unknown truth, proposition, or prediction but the concrete vindication of obedience. 'Faith' is obeying when it is not 'visible' that it 'pays' or 'works.'" Yoder also notes in this context that Hebrews sees Jesus as the culmination of the series of people who had exemplary faith.

ought to have in the face of military defeat, destruction, and the apparent impossibility of God's purposes for his people to continue (Hab. 2:4).

From the biblical text, Yoder argues that practices such as Jubilee and holy war make it very clear that the God of Israel is concerned with every aspect of Israel's life. This includes their willingness to trust him for their food and let the land lie fallow. It includes their concept of property. It includes their willingness to freely forgive debts at the appropriate time. It includes whether or not they forge military alliances with other nations and import foreign military technology such as horses and chariots. It includes whether and how the people will take up arms to ensure their survival. When the Messiah comes, will he address these social, political, and cultural concerns? Yoder's answer is a resounding yes.

Jesus the Messiah

Yoder's argument in *Politics of Jesus* and throughout his corpus is quite simple: the Bible teaches that Jesus the Messiah is directly relevant to questions of culture, including politics, economics, and social ethics.³⁸ Building on research in the biblical studies guild, Yoder surveys nine episodes of Luke and provides ample evidence that, as Israel's Messiah, Jesus is relevant to questions of politics, culture, and social ethics.³⁹

First, Mary, Zechariah, and John the Baptist all point to a hope that is not simply "spiritual," in the sense of being primarily about the relationship between God and the individual or in the sense of having to do with something on a completely different

³⁸ Yoder, *Politics*, 11.

³⁹ The following is a summary of chapter 2, "The Kingdom Coming," of Yoder, *Politics*, 21-53.

register than issues of culture and politics. In other words, when God acts, it will inevitably affect how human society is ordered. So Mary states,

He has shown strength with his arm,
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
And exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1:51-53).⁴⁰

Although Jesus' fulfillment of the hopes of Mary, Zechariah, and John the Baptist may have been different from their expectations, the difference was *not* that they were expecting a socio-political Messiah and that Jesus was a "spiritual" Messiah. Rather, Luke includes this material to show that "the pious hopes which awaited Jesus were those in which the suffering of Israel was discerned in all its social and political reality, and the work of the Awaited One was to be of the same stuff."⁴¹

Second, Jesus' baptism, commissioning, and temptation all have royal overtones. In Luke 3, the Father calls Jesus his Son, a term that, in the Old Testament, often refers to Israel's king (e.g., Ps. 2:7). Yoder suggests that Luke 3:22 merges the theme of kingship from Psalm 2:7 with the suffering servanthood of Isaiah 42:1. According to Yoder, "Thou art my Son" is "the summons to a task. Jesus is commissioned to be, in history, in Palestine, the messianic son and servant, the bearer of the goodwill and promise of God."⁴² In Luke 4, this term is again used, this time by the tempter, who throws down the gauntlet with the phrase, "if you are the Son of God." According to Yoder, the temptation

⁴⁰ I quote the text as given in Yoder, *Politics*, 21. Yoder does not specify which translation he is using.

⁴¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 23.

⁴² Yoder, *Politics*, 24.

of Christ is not primarily a test of his divinity, but a test of what kind of king he would be. Yoder points out that the tempter was not an Enlightenment evidentialist looking for proof of a Nicene or Chalcedonian definition of sonship. Rather, the temptations put to Jesus entail wrong ways of being God's anointed king. The economic temptation involves turning the stones to bread, feeding the crowds, and becoming king. The social-political temptation involves bowing the knee to the tempter and ruling over all the kingdoms of the earth. The religious reformer temptation involves Jesus casting himself from the pinnacle of the Temple thereby appearing as a heavenly herald. Jesus' response, Yoder notes, was not to deny that he was the true Son of God, the Messiah, or the rightful King: "He does not say, 'You are expecting a king and I am not a king.' No, he says, 'You do right to expect a king, but expect a different kind of king.' He claims that this is the fulfillment of the Messianic expectation rather than its rejection."⁴³ In claiming this, he makes himself directly relevant to questions of power and politics.

Third, Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 at Nazareth reveals the platform of the kingdom he proclaimed:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;
 He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor;
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives;
 And recovering of sight to the blind;
 To set at liberty the oppressed,
 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD (Luke 4:18-19, cf. Isa. 61:1-2)

⁴³ Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 244. I would argue that the ascension shows that the disciples' view of Jesus was not too political but too provincial. Jesus' ultimate goal was not simply to sit on a throne in Jerusalem as King of Israel but to sit at the right hand of the Father as Lord of the universe.

The messianic expectation, Yoder notes, is clearly expressed in social terms, connected with the year of Jubilee.⁴⁴ This hope is not “that Jesus is going to take Palestine off the end of the scale of temporal sequence but rather that there is to come into Palestine the equalizing impact of the Sabbath year.”⁴⁵ Whatever message Jesus was proclaiming, it can be seen neither as solely an inward message pointed at the individual nor as pointing to God and away from any concrete concerns of the culture and society. Instead, Yoder contends, the kingdom expected by Jesus is “a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by divine intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit.”⁴⁶

Fourth, Luke shows Jesus extending and reaffirming the Nazareth platform in calling the twelve as the firstfruits of restored Israel and in the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus gives blessings and woes, according to the format of Israel’s covenant blessings and curses, including blessings on the poor and the hungry. Jesus’ instructions to his followers call them to love their enemies and forgive debts in imitation of their heavenly Father (Luke 6:35-36).

Fifth, Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand in the desert presents an opportunity for a resuscitation of the economic temptation as the path to kingship. Immediately following the feeding, Jesus clarifies to his disciples that his path will be one of suffering and death,

⁴⁴ Cf. Yoder’s chapter “The Implications of the Jubilee,” in *Politics*, 59-75, for a further exposition of Jubilee themes in the Gospels. Yoder’s exposition of these themes is primarily a summary of André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973). For further confirmation of this thesis, see Sharon Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁴⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 30.

⁴⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 32.

and he “sets his face” to go to Jerusalem for that purpose (Luke 9:51). Whereas Jesus is already forging a path that confronts and rejects the Zealot temptation, his decision to set himself on a path to Jerusalem shows that he rejects withdrawal into either the desert or into mysticism. The path that leads to the cross is “the political alternative to both insurrection and quietism.”⁴⁷

Sixth, Jesus’ teaching about the cost of discipleship reinforces the notion that he was coming to instantiate a new social, political, and ethical option. Jesus is aware that Herod seeks to kill him (Luke 13:31-32) and that Jerusalem had turned against him (Luke 12:49-13:9; 13:33-35). Jesus therefore wants his disciples to realize that they are called to the kind of life that leads to the cross.

Yoder is keen to point out that “bearing one’s cross,” in the historical context of Jesus and his first hearers, could not be understood as it has often been used in Protestant pastoral care:

The believer’s cross is no longer [in light of biblical exegesis] any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded. The believers’ cross is, like that of Jesus, the price of social nonconformity. It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering; it is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost. It is not, like Luther’s or Thomas Müntzer’s or Zinzendorf’s or Kierkegaard’s cross or *Anfechtung*, an inward wrestling of the sensitive soul with self and sin; it is the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come.⁴⁸

Although other meanings may be, in some fashion, legitimate extensions or extrapolations of the original meaning of “cross,” Yoder does not want to forget that

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 36.

⁴⁸ Yoder, *Politics*, 96.

crucifixion is the preferred form of torture and capital punishment for those who would dare to challenge the sovereignty of the powers that be.⁴⁹

When Jesus calls his disciples to take up their cross, they are called not to lord it over others, but to be, like Jesus, one who serves.⁵⁰ That is, he is calling them to operate on the same plane as Caesar, but inhabit it differently. “Lording it over” and “serving” are two different answers to the same question of how to be God’s Messiah and followers of the Messiah. As such, this question shows the inherently social nature of the gospel:

In none of the accounts where this word [of serving rather than lording over] is reported does Jesus reprimand his disciples for expecting him to establish some new social order, as he would have had to do if the thesis of the only-spiritual kingdom were to prevail. He rather reprimands them for having misunderstood the character of that new social order which he does intend to set up. The novelty of its character is not that it is not social, or not visible, but that it is marked by an alternative to accepted patterns of leadership. The alternative to how the kings of the earth rule is not “spirituality” but servanthood.⁵¹

To be a disciple of the servant Messiah means a willingness to be a servant to others.

Seventh, Yoder examines what he terms the “epiphany in the Temple.” Jesus’ entrance into the Temple is preceded by the triumphal entry, in which the crowds use explicitly messianic language: “Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 19:38). Yoder notes that Jesus not only enters the Temple and drives out those who

⁴⁹ This point about the cross and crucifixion is also affirmed in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 543: “Crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating undesirables; it did so with the maximum degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear: we are in charge here; you are our property; we can do what we like with you. It insisted, coldly and brutally, on the absolute sovereignty of Rome, and of Caesar. It told an implicit story, of the uselessness of rebel recalcitrance and the ruthlessness of imperial power. It said, in particular: this is what happens to rebel leaders. Crucifixion was a symbolic act with a clear and frightening meaning.”

⁵⁰ Cf. Yoder, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 155-159.

⁵¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 38-39.

sold there, but that he also begins teaching daily in the Temple (Luke 19:47). This, Yoder contends, is a symbolic takeover of the Temple by the One who rightfully has jurisdiction over it. Notably, Jesus' adversaries could not bring a legitimate charge against him, making clear that whatever he did, he did in a legal fashion. As the Gospel of Luke comes to its climax, Yoder points out that all the pericopes serve to reinforce the clash of kingdoms occurring in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Eighth, Yoder sees Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane as a final renunciation of the temptation to messianic violence. Yoder asks, what would it have meant for Jesus' "cup to pass" from him? What would it have meant to gain the crown by means other than the cross? Yoder contends that a righteous holy war is the most viable option. Accompanied by the heavenly hosts and his own band of followers, Jesus would be installed as the messianic king in Jerusalem and, with the backing of Israel's God, cast the pagans from Israel's land. As Jesus had resisted this temptation earlier in the feeding of the five thousand and in the acclaim of the triumphal entry, so again he resists the tempter and accepts the will of his Father, who loves his enemies and sends rain upon both the just and the unjust.

Ninth, and finally, Luke presents Jesus' execution and exaltation. Jesus is executed as "King of the Jews," a tribute, Yoder holds, to Jesus' willingness to unsettle the established order of the reigning Jewish and Roman authorities. Although Jesus threatened their sovereignty, his threat was atypical in that it did not involve armed revolt. In any case, Jesus' crucifixion demonstrates that his public ministry made it plausible that he posed a serious enough threat to the Roman Empire to merit execution.

Moreover, in Jesus' own interpretation, his execution is simultaneously his exaltation. When the resurrected Jesus explains himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, their problem is that they did not fully reckon with the necessity of the Messiah's suffering: "like Peter at Caesarea Philippi, they were failing to see that the suffering of the Messiah *is* the inauguration of the kingdom."⁵² So Jesus asks them, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"⁵³ As Yoder points out, the ascension has not yet happened, so the Messiah's glory must be something other than and previous to that (although it would not exclude the ascension as its extension). Yoder concludes that the height of the Messiah's glory is first and foremost the suffering of the cross.⁵⁴

Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come.⁵⁵

Yoder's summary of key episodes in Luke makes it abundantly clear that Jesus' life, teachings, ministry, and crucifixion, as well as his resurrection and ascension, have

⁵² Yoder, *Politics*, 51.

⁵³ Luke 24:26. Quoted from Yoder, *Politics*, 51.

⁵⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 122, refers to John 3:13, 12:32, 13:31ff., 17:1-5 and Acts 3:13 as texts that identify the cross with Jesus' exaltation and glorification.

⁵⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 51. Although Yoder does not go on to address the resurrection and ascension, readers should not take this to mean he does not think they are relevant or that they did not actually happen. Elsewhere, he explicitly declares, "The victory of Christ is therefore not only at the point of resurrection and ascension. It is already part of the quality with which he accepts humiliation, with which he obeys and suffers" (Yoder, *Preface*, 119). Notably, in the updated 1994 edition of *Politics*, Yoder's final words in the final paragraph of the book focus not on the cross, but on resurrection and ascension (*Politics*, 246). Resurrection and ascension, Yoder wants to make clear, are not incidentally but directly connected to Jesus' willingness to suffer the cross.

direct bearing upon a multitude of social, political, and economic matters. Yoder concludes that Jesus, as prophet, priest, and king, was “the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships.”⁵⁶ Although one might be inclined to (or want to) write off the kingdom Jesus proclaimed as unreal, irrelevant, or impossible, one can no longer do this, Yoder contends, in the name of good exegesis or systematic theology. As Israel’s fully human Messiah, Jesus is directly related to culture. The real challenge that Scripture presents to us, for Yoder, is not to relate two unrelated entities, the Messiah and culture; the real challenge is whether we will answer the Messiah’s call to follow *him*, with all that that entails for our relationship to culture.

The Messiah who issues this call, however, is not only the Jewish Messiah. The Jewish authors of the New Testament use language to describe the Messiah that is generally reserved for the Jewish God alone. As a result, Yoder’s Christology focuses not only on the humanity of Jesus but also his divinity.

The Deity of Jesus: Logos and Creation

Yoder’s Christology repeatedly draws on New Testament texts that outline the work of the pre-incarnate Son: John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and Philippians 2. By examining Yoder’s interpretation of these texts, we see several points that are crucial to Yoder’s theology. First, there is clear exegetical support for a close link between Christ and creation insofar as Christ is active in the work of creating and sustaining all things. Since the Word is the one by whom all things were created, when the Word takes on flesh, Yoder emphasizes that we must pay attention to the shape of that life. Second,

⁵⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 52.

Yoder affirms Christ's divinity. As God in the flesh, Jesus is the preeminent revelation of who God is. Although some scholars accuse Yoder of having a low Christology, this section demonstrates that position to be untenable.⁵⁷ Third, because the divine Son is intimately involved in creation, it would be folly, Yoder thinks, to pit creation and redemption against one another. Unfortunately, Yoder declares, the coherence between Christ and creation is a claim "which, in a systematic way, most theologies to our day do not really believe."⁵⁸ Yoder notes that several thinkers (including Luther, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Emil Brunner) draw a sharp distinction between creation and redemption, which are seen to have two different, if not opposing, ethical implications.⁵⁹ Although the theological or ethical systems of these thinkers pit Christ and creation against each other, Yoder contends that Scripture does not.

Jesus the Creator

Before turning to the aforementioned New Testament texts, it is helpful to see that Yoder links them to Proverbs 8:

Does not wisdom call
 Does not understanding raise her voice?
 On the heights beside the way,
 In the paths she takes her stand
 Beside the gates in front of the town,
 At the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
 To you, O men, I call,
 And my cry is to the sons of men...

⁵⁷ See A. James Reimer, "Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 2 (1998): 12; and Thomas Finger, "Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 333.

⁵⁸ Yoder, "Glory in a Tent," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 82.

⁵⁹ Yoder, "Glory in a Tent," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 82.

I, wisdom, dwell in prudence,
 And I find knowledge and discretion.
 The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil...
 I have counsel and sound wisdom,
 I have insight, I have strength.
 By me kings reign,
 And rulers decree what is just;
 By me princes rule, and nobles govern the earth...
 The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
 The first of his acts of old.
 Ages ago I was set up,
 At the first, before the beginning of the earth.
 When there were no depths I was brought forth (Proverbs 8:1-4, 12-16, 22-24).⁶⁰

Yoder makes several observations about this text. First, wisdom personified is the “coherence of creation” and the “agent of God in the rest of creation.”⁶¹ Second, wisdom is not merely created, but divine: “it partakes of the nature and authority of God.”⁶² Third, although divine, this wisdom is also human and material, in the sense that Proverbs is about the practical skills of living well.⁶³ So Proverbs speaks of a wisdom that is (1) divine, (2) involved in creation, and (3) a guide for how humans ought to live. Although the relevant New Testament texts do not directly cite Proverbs 8, Yoder contends that this notion of wisdom stands behind the New Testament texts that speak of the Son as *logos*, as divine, and as agent of creation.

⁶⁰ This is the text of Proverbs 8 as found in Yoder, *Preface*, 184. The editors of that volume note that the quotations of Scripture in *Preface* have been standardized and that Yoder does not consistently use one translation (Hauerwas and Sider, “Introduction,” 27). Unless otherwise noted, I will use the biblical text as given in *Preface*.

⁶¹ Yoder, *Preface*, 184.

⁶² Yoder, *Preface*, 184.

⁶³ Yoder, *Preface*, 186.

For Yoder, the hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 is also vital to understanding the person and work of Christ:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NASB)

Yoder points out that “equality with God” and Jesus’ “not grasping” this equality can be taken in two different ways. First, *kenosis* is often seen as a metaphysical emptying. That is, as Son of God, Jesus gives up certain divine qualities, power, and attributes in order to become human.⁶⁴ This interpretation focuses on the divine Son who is willing not only to become human but to suffer death on a cross. Second, Paul’s language of “equality with God” also draws a parallel between the humanity of Adam and the humanity of Jesus. Adam succumbed to the serpent’s temptation to “become as God” (Gen. 3:5). In contrast, as the true human, Jesus accepted his humanity and consequent place as creature, thereby refusing to grasp at equality with God.

Although Yoder sees Philippians 2 as comparing the humanity of Adam and Jesus, he also contends that this text affirms the preexistence and divinity of Christ.⁶⁵ Yoder points out that if one focuses only on the humanity of Jesus, Philippians 2 could be

⁶⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 83.

⁶⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 124. Cf. “The Form of a Servant,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 91-92.

read as an adoptionist text, with Jesus elevated to the position of Son by virtue of his obedience. This, Yoder contends, does not do justice to Jesus:

The phenomenon of Jesus Christ reported in the early story is too unexplainable, too unique...to have been only another human, like others from the beginning. The idea of Jesus beginning life like other people is not enough to explain what he did. Or, to say it from the side of the monotheism of Jewish Christianity within which the church arose, the idea of a man becoming or being made God is unacceptable. The only alternative is for God to take the initiative and become a man among humans.⁶⁶

For Yoder, when we think of the person and work of Christ, we must acknowledge that he is divine, at work well before the incarnation.⁶⁷

In Colossians 1, the author of that epistle (Paul or otherwise) specifically focuses on the Christ's work in creation. In speaking of Christ, he states,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Col. 1:15-20, NASB)

Yoder makes three pertinent observations about this text. First, we clearly see that Christ is identified as the agent of creation.⁶⁸ Second, whatever order is in creation results from Christ's sustaining work: "In him everything 'systematizes,' everything holds together.

⁶⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 124.

⁶⁷ Cf. Yoder, "'But We Do See Jesus': The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 52. There Yoder states that Jesus "really had divine sonship in his grasp."

⁶⁸ Cf. Maximus the Confessor, "On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 123-129.

This ‘everything’ that Christ maintains united is the world powers. It is the reign of order among creatures, order which in its original intention is a divine gift.”⁶⁹ According to Colossians 1, it is not simply the Father or the Spirit (or both) who upholds the created universe but the Son. Third, because Christ upholds the regularity and order of creation, this allows for the possibility of nature, history, and society. Lest any of these categories be seen as more primarily to do with the Father or Spirit, Yoder reminds his readers that, exegetically, they have just as much to do with the Son. Importantly, this does not preclude the work of the Father or Spirit in creation and providence. Yoder is not trying to say that *only* the Son creates and sustains, but rather that creation cannot be separated from Christ on valid Trinitarian grounds. Indeed, any Trinitarianism that seeks to be exegetically sound must emphasize the Son’s role in creation.

In Hebrews 1, the author also presents Christ as directly related to creation. When commenting on this text, Yoder first highlights that the book of Hebrews is about continuity and fulfillment. What God is doing through the Son stands in continuity with how God spoke in the past. Jesus’ sonship, however, goes beyond how God communicated in the past. According to Yoder, the term “son of God” is used in the Old Testament to refer to both angels (even rebellious ones) and kings and, in the New Testament, to the Messiah.⁷⁰ Given these varied meanings, Hebrews 1 makes several striking statements about Jesus as the Son of God:

In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and

⁶⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 141. Cf. Yoder, *Preface*, 123.

⁷⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 116.

bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power...To what angel did God ever say, "Thou art my son...?" Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son?"...Of the Son he says, "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever." (Hebrews 1:2-3, 5, 8)

According to Yoder, this is a distinctive use of the term "son of God."⁷¹ Jesus is not "son of God" like the angels; he is identified as equal to the Father. Whereas angel and kings can be called son of God in the sense of "dependence upon or subjection to God," Jesus is uniquely identified as Son of God who "bears the very stamp of his nature," an identity with the Father that differentiates him from all others.⁷² Whereas certain passages could potentially be taken as adoptionist, such as Paul's statement that Jesus is called "Son by declaration" (Rom. 1:4), Yoder notes that the author of Hebrews makes abundantly clear that the Son is addressed by the Father as "God." As such, the Son is no less than the agent of creation and very God.

In John 1, Yoder finds final proof that any dichotomy between creation and Christ cannot be sustained:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing has come into being that has come into being...He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. (John 1:1-3, 10, NASB)

Yoder points out that John uses a word often used in Greek philosophy, *logos*, to point to something unique. Yoder notes that *logos* generally has a variety of nuances, including reason, the rationality of God that underlies the universe, and the communicative aspect of God. Although the emphasis on God as Creator and the notion of God's creative

⁷¹ Yoder, *Preface*, 117.

⁷² Yoder, *Preface*, 116-117.

wisdom is not innovative,⁷³ it is new to claim that the truth and power we see in Jesus is none other than the truth and power of God that created and sustains all things.⁷⁴ In his prologue, John thus goes beyond what would have been normal and acceptable for both Greeks and Jews in the proclamation that the *logos* became flesh. Yoder observes that this claim about the incarnation goes on to become, in 1 John, the “key to faithfulness” and the “center” of the apostolic witness (1 John 1:1-2, 4:1-3).⁷⁵ In this way, John affirms that Jesus is both truly human and yet more than merely human. In Yoder’s words, John clearly shows that the Word is “preexistent” and that he shares in “the divine work of creation.”⁷⁶ Based on John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and Philippians 2, we must not presume that the person and work of Christ began only in the first century, for that would do injustice to Scripture. Yoder thus follows the New Testament in affirming the Son’s preexistence, divinity, and work in creation.⁷⁷

Jesus the Preexistent One

Another way to show that Yoder affirms Christ’s divinity is through his treatment of the preexistence of the Son. Despite Yoder’s affirmations of the biblical text, some readers, including Thomas Finger, still contend that he is reductionistic, denying that

⁷³ Cf. Yoder, *Preface*, 184.

⁷⁴ Yoder, “Glory in a Tent,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 82.

⁷⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 121.

⁷⁶ Yoder, “Glory in a Tent,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 81.

⁷⁷ Yoder, *Preface*, 208.

Yoder has any “transcendent dimension” to his Christology.⁷⁸ By this, Finger means that Yoder’s affirmations can be reduced to ethics, or other fields or conceptualities “whose terms refer exclusively to human characteristics, activities, relationships and potentialities.”⁷⁹ Lest anyone continue to doubt that Yoder holds to a high view of Christ, he not only affirms it in conversation with the biblical text, but he repeatedly emphasizes the biblical support for the divinity and preexistence of the Son in conversation with the Trinitarian developments and heresies of early Church history. Specifically, Finger’s thesis cannot make sense of the texts where Yoder affirms and appeals to Christ’s preexistence. To argue that Yoder is referring to a purely human or immanent plane makes nonsense of both Yoder’s language and the theologians with which he is dealing.

First, in his survey of Tertullian, Yoder points out that Tertullian tries to develop ways of thinking and speaking that accurately reflect “what the biblical text demands must be said: the elements of preexistence, distinctness, and monotheism.”⁸⁰

Significantly, Yoder is not merely listing what Tertullian perceived the biblical text to be demanding, but what Yoder himself takes the biblical texts, especially those outlined above, to be demanding, which includes preexistence, distinctness between Father, Son, and Spirit, and monotheism.⁸¹ Tertullian marks the real beginning of the doctrine of the Trinity, Yoder holds, inasmuch as he tries to combat the idea that “distinction” and

⁷⁸ Finger, “Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics?” 333 .

⁷⁹ Finger, “Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics?” 320.

⁸⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 191.

⁸¹ Cf. Yoder, *Preface*, 193, where Yoder points out that Sabellianism makes a distinction between God in himself (as unity) and God as perceived (in threeness). The real distinction that matters, according to Yoder, is that of Father, Son, and Spirit.

“unity” are opposites. When language is taken at its *prima facie* meaning, the Father and Son, God and Jesus, God and the *logos*, are either the same or they are not. In grappling with the biblical text, Tertullian begins to push toward something new: “a way of affirming distinction and unity at the same time without being silly or contradictory.”⁸² For Yoder, this must be done in order to make sense of the claims of the biblical text itself.

Second, when outlining Sabellianism, Yoder states that it must be tested against the texts outlined above, especially concerning the concept of preexistence. A basic point of Sabellianism is that “God takes the form of a mold that the world provides.”⁸³ The problem with this notion, according to Yoder, is that the exegetical grounds for preexistence are ignored: “there is no preexisting Son, but only the Son when the shape of Jesus is there.”⁸⁴ Yoder points out that the Sabellian view also struggles to account for how the cross was salvific because it fails to “take seriously the preexistence of Christ.”⁸⁵ Moreover, this position could also lead to the problematic view that the Son has no enduring existence once the Spirit is manifest. Sabellianism fails the test of faithfulness to Scripture, in Yoder’s view, precisely because it does not adequately account for the preexistence of the Son.

⁸² Yoder, *Preface*, 191.

⁸³ Yoder, *Preface*, 192. It should be remembered that Yoder is presenting this material to seminary students, not writing a scholarly paper on Sabellianism.

⁸⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 193.

⁸⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 194.

Finally, Yoder surveys the work of Arius, noting that Arius was concerned with preserving God's transcendence.⁸⁶ Arius held two propositions: (1) God could not have needed to have the Son to be God for that would destroy divine independence and (2) the Son cannot be made out of God. Arius' conclusion, therefore, is that the Son was created like all other things, *ex nihilo*. Yoder criticizes Arius for holding that Jesus earned sonship based on his obedience. Arius' position is a problem, according to Yoder, because it undermines Scripture's teaching about the Son's divinity and preexistence. On Yoder's read, this "dismantled not only the systematic, dogmatic, and philosophical statements of the second and third centuries, but began to go back and challenge some of the things that the New Testament itself had said."⁸⁷ Arius is thus a specimen of a "naïve" biblical reading that does not adequately account for the way that Scripture's Christological claims demand a rethinking of ontology.⁸⁸

Although Yoder recognizes that the actual word "preexistence" does not appear in the New Testament, he is equally clear that "the concept of preexistence [is] affirmed in the biblical documents."⁸⁹ Indeed, Yoder notes that a high Christology characterizes the oldest texts of the New Testament.⁹⁰ Hence, later Christological and Trinitarian developments of the Church must be tested according to whether they do justice to the text of Scripture. Yoder therefore believed that as early Church theologians attempted to

⁸⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 196-197.

⁸⁷ Yoder, *Preface*, 197.

⁸⁸ Yoder, *Preface*, 208.

⁸⁹ Yoder, *Preface*, 208.

⁹⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 139.

encapsulate the New Testament's claims about Jesus, about the one true God, and about the distinction between the Father and Son, a key test was whether they rightly affirmed Jesus' divinity and preexistence.⁹¹

Implications of Yoder's Christology

Yoder convincingly makes the case that the Bible presents Jesus as directly relevant to both culture and creation. As Israel's Messiah, Christ's work of redemption was not purely "religious," as though it had nothing to do with politics, economics, and culture. Moreover, because Jesus is the enfleshed *logos* who creates, orders, and sustains creation, creation and redemption are necessarily connected in him. Based on the exegetical evidence, Yoder draws several conclusions.

The Son and Creation

The first implication of Yoder's exegesis is that a properly Trinitarian doctrine of creation must include the Son as an active participant.⁹² As Jan Rohls puts it, the Son's

⁹¹ Based on the textual evidence outlined in this section, Finger's claim that Yoder has no "transcendent dimension" of Christology is baffling. Contrary to Finger's argument, Yoder claimed that the biblical authors dismantled the transcendent referent *as commonly understood*, but not that they jettisoned transcendence (or divinity) completely. For example, John 1 does not simply tell people what they already know about the *logos*, but says that the *logos* has taken on flesh. If Yoder is really saying that there is no transcendent referent to John 1's *logos*, then it is hard to see how either the original audience or contemporary readers can make sense of John 1. Did Yoder really think that the Apostle's claim that "the *logos* was *theos*" has no transcendent referent, but referred only to human "characteristics, activities, relationships, and potentialities"? If so, Yoder was a weak linguist, theologian, and philosopher indeed. Yoder, however, does not think that. He thinks that John "dismantled" the transcendent reference *as understood by the non-Christian interpretation* of this ontology. The writer did not throw away this ontological conceptuality, but hammered it into a Christo-logical shape. John 1 does not say, "Let me fit Christ into this pre-Christian logic," but "how does Christ change the shape of this logic?" Thus, although Finger interprets Yoder as denying that the biblical writers "refashioned" Hellenistic conceptualities to express new transcendent content, Yoder himself explicitly describes the biblical writers as doing this refashioning work, in which the writers "seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes," proclaiming Jesus at the top of the cosmology as divine and the bottom of the cosmology as human (see Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 54).

mediation of creation “excludes the possibility of regarding creation as the work of the Father alone.”⁹³ Christians sometimes lack a Trinitarian doctrine of creation for two reasons. The first is simply that the Father’s role in creation is mentioned whereas the Son’s role in creation is downplayed, as in the Apostles’ Creed. Yoder does not fault the Apostles’ Creed for speaking of the Father as Creator, but he notes that the New Testament emphasis on the Son as agent of creation is missing.⁹⁴ Although the Christian tradition as a whole is careful to affirm a Trinitarian doctrine of creation, with the Son playing an essential role, some theologians are not, which leads to a second, more insidious problem.

In the last several centuries, some theologians (including the Niebuhrs) struggle to affirm the deity of Christ and therefore to pay due attention to John 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1. For *a priori* systematic reasons, these texts are excluded from consideration when it comes to thinking about the relationship of Christ and creation, and the Father and Son.⁹⁵ This skews the doctrines of the Trinity and of creation. This failure to affirm Christ’s deity then *generates* the “problem” of how to relate the Father and Son, Christ and creation, or creation and gospel.⁹⁶ As Yoder has made clear, attention to the New

⁹² I do not attempt to address here the role of the Spirit in creation in Yoder’s theology.

⁹³ Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 55.

⁹⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 162.

⁹⁵ The distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is one way that this problem gets systematized. Yoder, *Politics*, 103.

⁹⁶ For example, in H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (1946): 371-384, Niebuhr speaks only of the Father as Creator.

Testament and willingness to let it speak on its own terms will dissolve these apparent problems. Because Yoder affirms the deity of Christ as proclaimed in the New Testament, his doctrines of the Trinity and of creation stand in line with Scripture. The Word who tabernacled among us is none other than the Word who was in the beginning.

The Father and Redemption

A second implication of Yoder's exegesis has to do with the unity of the Father and the Son in redemption. If certain thinkers are prone to put the Son on the sidelines in creation, they are likely to make the concomitant mistake of neglecting the Father's role in redemption. These moves are equally problematic. Yoder thus underscores that the Father and Son are unified not only in creation but in redemption.⁹⁷ This affects how we think about the wisdom and power of the Creator God. When we look at Jesus, we see who the Father is:

Christian belief is not content to see Jesus as truly the servant of men; we confess Him as Son of God. He is not only a demonstration of perfect manhood but at the same time the manifestation of the Godhead. It follows that God himself must be understood after the fashion not of a sultan or a judge, but of a servant. He who said "I am among you as one who serves" also said "He who has seen me has seen the Father." We must overcome the sub-Christian conception of God as a sort of distant, uninterested, or vengeful monarch who would just as soon see us all perish if it were not for the more humane or more friendly intervention of His Son. God the Father is Love; God the Father was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and not reckoning our sins against us; God the Father so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Yoder also thinks the Spirit is equally involved, but that is not my focus in this section.

⁹⁸ Yoder, "The Lordship of Christ and the Power Struggle," in *The Lordship of Christ: Proceedings of the Seventh Mennonite World Conference*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963), 508.

To look at Jesus is never just to see Jesus, but to see the Father, because the life, ministry, and death that Jesus undertook for our sakes was a mission given to him *by the Father*, as Jesus states in John 18:11, “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given to me?”⁹⁹

Moreover, in the concrete life and teaching of Jesus the Messiah, the Father is revealed. Specifically, Jesus makes the claim that by loving their enemies, his followers are directly imitating their heavenly Father (Matt. 5:43-48). As Yoder points out, “the thought that we might be like God the Father is not a frequent one in the New Testament.”¹⁰⁰ In Jesus’ own love of the enemy and willingness to exemplify suffering love, we see the Father’s love for us. Christ’s rejection of justified violence or holy war is thus not merely his choice, but that of the Father:

The decision of Jesus not to be a violent zealot Messiah now comes to be seen as the surfacing, the manifestation, the incarnation of the deep reality of God’s own nature...As you see the grain of a piece of wood at its edges, Jesus’ choice not to rule the world violently is now seen to be the surfacing of an eternal divine decision...an eternally binding and freeing decision of the Son, very God of very God, to enter into our history. Then self-emptying is not only what Jesus did. It is not only what the eternal divine Son did. If it is that, then it is the very nature of God. The Creator of the universe is a servant. The Almighty loves his enemies.¹⁰¹

Given the unity of Father and Son in creation and redemption, the New Testament sees the cross and resurrection as both a local, historical event, but also as revealing something universal about God’s interaction with his creation: “What happened in the cross is a revelation of the shape of what God is, and of what God does, in the total drama of history. They affirm as a permanent pattern what in Jesus was a particular event... God

⁹⁹ John 18:11. Yoder references this point in *Politics*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Yoder, “The Moral Axioms of the Kingdom Coming,” in *To Hear the Word*, 30. Cf. Yoder, “Jesus: A Model of Radical Political Action,” in *War of the Lamb*, 79.

¹⁰¹ Yoder, “The Form of a Servant?” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 93.

has the same shape as Jesus, and he always has had. The cross is what creation is all about. What Jesus did was local, of course, because that is how serious and real our history is to God. But what the cross was locally is universally and always the divine nature.”¹⁰² In other words, the very nature of God is that of self-giving love. It is out of the abundance of God’s self-giving love that God creates the world, orders and sustains the world, and makes covenants and binds himself to frail and fallen human beings. The cross and resurrection are the apex of God’s interaction with humanity. The cross and resurrection make clear the full extent of God’s self-giving love and they are fully consistent with the character and nature of God as revealed in creation and covenant history. The connection between creation and redemption is clear in the prologue of John’s Gospel, which testifies that “what God always was continues. And what the Word of God was always trying to do in creation and in the garden of Eden and in Abraham and in Moses and in the prophets—shining on faithfully even though the darkness did not receive it—continues.”¹⁰³

The Normativity of the Messiah

A third implication of Yoder’s exegesis is that the Messiah is the normative human. The New Testament, according to Yoder, demonstrates that God did not simply speak by the words of the Son, but was the “being and presence” of the Son.¹⁰⁴ Hence, revelation is not simply a part of what Jesus was doing; rather, the sum total of Jesus’ life

¹⁰² Yoder, “Glory in a Tent,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 85.

¹⁰³ Yoder, “Glory in a Tent,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ Yoder, *Preface*, 333.

is revelation. Furthermore, Jesus, as God in the flesh, is not only the revelation of God but also the revelation of true humanity: “The humanity of Jesus is a revelation of the purpose of God for the person who wills to do God’s will,”¹⁰⁵ including God’s will with respect to our life as cultural and social beings. A biblical view of Jesus as fully human and fully divine, Yoder argues, will result in seeing the humanity of Jesus as normative for our humanity. A mistake in either an Ebionitic or Gnostic-Docetic direction will lead one astray. Both of these views lose the full revelation given in Jesus by focusing exclusively on either the divine or the human nature of Christ.

According to Yoder, the Ebionitic stance is reductionistic in focusing solely on the humanity of Jesus, reducing him to a good rabbi, “dissolving Jesus’ uniqueness into a sub-case of history in general.”¹⁰⁶ An Ebionitic social ethic emphasizes Jesus as a good teacher and moral example but undercuts his ultimate authority by denying that he was truly divine. Yoder contends that there is often a covert Ebionism in Christianity, which manifests itself as a refusal to allow the social and cultural import of Jesus to affect the Church’s social-political practices. In other words, it sees the *commonality* of Jesus with all other humans as a reason for discounting his normativity for the Christian’s cultural life.

On the other hand, a Gnostic or Docetic approach focuses on his divinity, but “dissolve[s] Jesus into one more example of revelation.”¹⁰⁷ This Gnostic social ethic sets

¹⁰⁵ Yoder, “Christ, the Light of the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 185 (emphasis original).

¹⁰⁶ Yoder, *Preface*, 173.

¹⁰⁷ Yoder, *Preface*, 173.

aside the normativity of Jesus by emphasizing his divinity, and thus the *difference* between Jesus with all other humans. This approach is more common among those who hold to creedal orthodoxy and typically surfaces in claims that the Christian community should not attempt to imitate Jesus' ethical life because he was *unique*.¹⁰⁸ Although Yoder certainly affirms the uniqueness of Jesus as the enfleshed *logos* and the uniqueness of the redemptive work that only he could accomplish, Yoder also emphasizes that, as a full and complete human being, Jesus must be seen as normative. Thus, the social ethics of the Christian community should correspond to those of Jesus.¹⁰⁹ As Nigel Wright helpfully explains, "Discipleship involves conformity to Christ in his death. Unique though it may be, it is also uniquely normative. In the Anabaptist tradition, and arguably in Scripture, the cross is not only an event but a divine principle with prototypical

¹⁰⁸ Richard Mouw worries that Yoder risks downplaying Jesus' uniqueness, especially with respect to his unique cross and atoning death. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 115-116. Yoder speaks to this concern in the context of his discussion of capital punishment. There he states, "The culmination of the story for our purposes is that the Cross of Christ puts an end to sacrifice for sin. The sacrificial worldview of Genesis 9 is not abandoned by the New Testament as culturally obsolete, as we are tempted to do. It is rather assumed and fulfilled, when the Epistle to the Hebrews takes as its central theme the way the death of Christ is the end of all sacrifice... To say it in the most orthodox theological terms, the end of expiation for bloodshed, the end—not as abrogation but as fulfillment—of the arrangement announced in Genesis 9:6, is the innocent death of the Son, wrongly denounced by a righteous religious establishment and wrongfully executed by a legitimate government." Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," 159-160. Elsewhere, Yoder reiterates, "That is why I have argued (in *Death Penalty Debate* 158ff) that it makes more sense to agree with *The Letter to the Hebrews* and with Karl Barth that the demand for death as penalty was somehow legitimate, and that the Cross of Jesus Christ has met that need, rather than to reject with moral outrage as we are inclined to do the entire notion of a vindictive demand." Yoder, "You Have It Coming: The Cultural Role of Punishment, An Exploratory Essay," (Shalom Desktop Publications, 1995), ch. 6, available online at <http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/CHAPTERVI.pdf> [accessed Aug. 19, 2009]. Taken as a whole, these texts show that Yoder's case against capital punishment depends not on generic humanitarian grounds but on a robust account of Jesus bearing the penalty for sin. Precisely because Jesus is offered up as a sacrifice, no further sacrifice (including that in capital punishment) is needed. For more on Yoder's exegesis of Genesis 9, see pages 218-221 below.

¹⁰⁹ Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), 134. Chapter seven of *Politics*, "The Disciple of Christ and the Way of Jesus," is devoted to examining the numerous New Testament passages in which the Christian is called to imitate, participate in, and follow Jesus Christ.

meaning, determining the life and fate of disciples.”¹¹⁰ Yoder fears that many thinkers have missed this prototypical aspect of Christ’s cross, presuming that “because Jesus is seen as the Word made flesh, he cannot be seen as normative person.”¹¹¹

In contrast, Yoder argues that *precisely because* Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, he should be seen as normative human being. As Yoder forcefully phrases the question, “What becomes of the meaning of incarnation if Jesus is not normatively human? If he is human but not normative, is this not the ancient ebionitic heresy? If he be somehow authoritative but not in his humanness, is this not a new gnosticism?”¹¹² For Yoder, the affirmation of Jesus as fully human and fully divine is logically connected to his authoritative and normative humanity.

Christ and Creation

Fourth, and crucially for the thesis of this chapter and dissertation, Yoder’s analysis of the New Testament’s Christology shows that there can be no sharp dichotomy between creation and redemption, whether in theology or ethics. Although this will be unfolded in detail in the next chapter, this chapter clarifies one of Yoder’s central theological rules: New Testament Christology will not allow us to pit creation and redemption against one another, either as sources producing contradictory knowledge of God or as sources producing contradicting norms for human social and cultural life:

¹¹⁰ Nigel Goring Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 93.

¹¹¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 226.

¹¹² Yoder, *Politics*, 10.

If truly, as John says, the Word without which nothing was made that was made became flesh and tented among us in the man Jesus, then no a priori dichotomy between creation and gospel can be accepted. If truly, as Paul said in citing an ancient hymn in his plea to the Philippians, the norm for how we are to be minded is yielding authority rather than seizing it, in favor of taking on the form of a slave, there is no ground for a mandate to do the opposite.¹¹³

Indeed, it is precisely because the Word became flesh, with all of the cultural concerns of humanity, that Christians are enabled to go about “the redemption of *creation*.”¹¹⁴ Yoder explains his logic in a little-known, unpublished essay presented at a 1980 conference, which is worth quoting at length:

It is one of the standard reproaches addressed to minority Christianity that it does not take seriously the possible goodness of creation and the duties of building a culture. That argument would only hold if it were fair to separate creation from redemption and confuse it instead with fallenness. When the early witnesses make Messiah Lord of the cosmos, they reclaim what can be reclaimed of the original creation vision, precisely by denying that there exists an autonomous creaturely world needing to be served in its own terms. They confess instead that the claim of the cosmos to autonomy is its rebelliousness, and that its subordination to the Lord Yahweh has begun with the kenosis of the incarnation, with the cross, and moved forward with the resurrection and ascension...Both historically in the experienced cultural creativity of minority communities, and in the theological integrity of the linkage of redemption and creation, the gospel formulation of the cultural mandate is that which flows from this high christology.¹¹⁵

In other words, to be redeemed by Christ and ambassadors of reconciliation is to participate in the cultural life for which we were created. The way of Christ runs with the grain of the universe precisely because Christ is both Word and Lord of the universe.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Yoder, “Creation and Gospel,” 8.

¹¹⁴ Yoder, “That Household We Are,” 8 (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁵ Yoder, “That Household We Are,” 8.

¹¹⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 246.

Conclusion

Yoder's Trinitarian theology of culture is able to connect creation and redemption clearly and coherently because Yoder pays due attention to key New Testament texts regarding the person and work of Christ. Although focusing primarily on Christology, Yoder keeps the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit at the forefront of his theology, so that all are involved in creation and redemption. There is coherence between creation and redemption because there is coherence within the Trinitarian God. The coherence between creation and redemption is fully revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word in the flesh and the fully human Jewish Messiah who directly confronted key questions of culture and society as intrinsic to his redemptive message and mission.

Does Yoder's focus on Christ produce an eclipse of creation? Does this ignore other lights, such as orders of creation or natural law? The following chapter demonstrates that Yoder possesses a robust doctrine of creation and that his focus on Christ enriches rather than impoverishes the connection between creation and redemption and the concomitant implications for a theology of culture.

CHAPTER 5: THE POWER OF JESUS AND THE POLITICS OF CREATION

Yoder's focus on Jesus is well-known. Less known is that a careful reading of Yoder's corpus provides suggestive clues and explicit statements that help to chart Yoder's doctrine of creation and theology of culture. As a result, many commentators, including J. Budziszewski, J. Daryl Charles, Guenther Haas, A. James Reimer, Gerald Schlabach, and Nigel Goring Wright, accuse Yoder of lacking a sound doctrine of creation and thereby having a deficient theology of culture.¹ These thinkers rightly raise the question of the relationship between Jesus and creation with all that that entails for theology and social ethics. The central question, as Richard Mouw succinctly puts it, is this: "When we live out these patterns of discipleship [the "politics of Jesus"] are we also reestablishing the politics of the original creation?"² In this chapter, I demonstrate how

¹ J. Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); J. Daryl Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," *First Things* 168 (Dec. 2006): 33-38; Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 137-141; Guenther Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 108-129; A. James Reimer, "'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 245-273; Gerald Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as an Augustinian Interlocutor," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 221-244; and Nigel Goring Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 163-166.

² Mouw, "Creational Politics: Some Calvinist Amendments," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 23, no. 2 (1993): 191. Mouw also engages the relation of creation and Jesus in "Jesus and Political Authority," in *Perspectives on Christology: Essays in Honor of Paul K. Jewett*, eds. Marguerite Shuster and Richard Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 253-267.

Yoder answers in the affirmative. In spelling out this answer, I also respond to Schlabach's challenge to Yoder, namely, that he needs a robust theology of creation.³ By moving through Yoder's account of creation, fall, and redemption, I show that he presents an ontology of peaceful power in which humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and the Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing.

Power and the Powers

Yoder highlights the importance that the Powers play in his own thought as a viable alternative to other theological and biblical constructions: "It would not be too much to claim that the Pauline cosmology of the powers represents an alternative to the dominant ('Thomist') vision of 'natural law' as a more biblical way systematically to relate Christ and creation."⁴ Yoder goes on to underscore, in his 1994 epilogue to the *Politics* chapter "Christ and Power," that his view of the Powers is not original but a report on biblical scholarship.⁵ Although Yoder is primarily reporting in *Politics*, his

³ Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City," 235.

⁴ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 159. Cf. also Yoder, "Regarding Nature," in *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, eds. John Witte Jr and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 427-430. Also available online at <http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/REGARDINGNATURE.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2010).

⁵ Sources who discussed the doctrine of the Powers prior to *Politics*, listed chronologically, include Martin Dibelius, *Die Geisterwelt im Blaubeuren des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1909); Gunther Dehn, "Engel und Obrigkeit," *Theologische Aufsätze: Karl Barth, zum 50*, ed. Ernst Wolf (München: C. Kaiser, 1936); Karl Barth, "Church and State," (originally published as "Rechtfertigung und Recht," *Theologische Studien* 1 [Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938]) and "Christian Community and Civil Community," (originally published as "Christusgemeinde und Bürgergemeinde," *Theologische Studien* 20 [Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946]) in *Community, State, and Church*, ed. Will Herberg (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1960); Willem A. Visser't Hooft, *The Kingship of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1948); Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM Press, 1951); James S. Stewart, "On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 3 (1951): 292-301; Anders Nygren, "Christ and

other writings develop more fully his own distinctive exousiology, in which he argues for a doctrine of creation and theology of culture that draws upon the biblical language of power and the Powers. If we are to do justice to Yoder's thought on the Powers, we must look beyond *Politics*. I do not attempt here to judge whether Yoder offers the definitive exegesis on the Powers. That task is beyond my scope. Instead, I look to Yoder's doctrine of the Powers to show that he both has a positive account of creation and that far from pitting creation and redemption against one another, he shows their coherence through his exousiology.

Before Yoder fully outlines his biblical exousiology, he points to both the clarity and ambiguity of power language. Biblical authors (primarily Paul) use language of "powers" in a variety of contexts and with a variety of other terms.⁶ Some terms have

the Forces of Destruction," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (1951): 363-375; E. Gordon Rupp, *Principalities and Powers* (London: Epworth Press, 1952); G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *New Testament Studies* 1, no. 1 (1954): 17-28; G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Oscar Cullman, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/3*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960); Clinton Morrison, *The Powers That Be* (London: SCM Press, 1960); Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961); Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962); William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury Press, 1964); D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (London: Blackwell, 1964); Albert H. van den Heuvel, *These Rebellious Powers* (New York: Friendship Press, 1965); and Amos N. Wilder, *Kerygma, Eshcatology, and Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966). Yoder references Hendrik Berkhof, G.B. Caird, G.H.C. MacGregor, and Markus Barth (*Politics*, 136). He also points to Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Willem A. Visser't Hooft, Oscar Cullman, and Wolfgang Schweitzer (Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003], 161). Elsewhere, he cites James Stewart, Anders Nygren, Karl Barth, Clinton Morrison, and D.E.H. Whiteley ("Letter to John Stott," [Dec. 7, 1978], in the author's possession, 2). Since Yoder wrote *Politics*, Walter Wink has done a thorough study of the Powers. See Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); and Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁶ The following paragraph is a summary of Yoder, *Politics*, 137. For "powers" language in the New Testament, see Matt 24:29; Luke 12:11; Rom 8:38, 39; 13:1-4; 1 Cor 2:8; 15:24-26; Eph 1:20-23; 2:1,

political overtones, such as principalities, powers, thrones, and dominions. Other terms are more “cosmological” (Yoder’s term): angels, archangels, elements, heights, and depths. Still others are more religious, such as law and knowledge. These terms are often juxtaposed with one another, sometimes suggesting parallelism, other times not, as Paul addresses a variety of issues in different contexts. This language, Yoder acknowledges, is complex and suggests a whole host of concerns at play in the text.

This linguistic and conceptual complexity, Yoder suggests, may be helpfully compared to the contemporary concept of “structure.”⁷ This equally complex term has a wide spectrum of meaning, depending on the context in which it is deployed. In social and political fields, it can point to institutions, agencies, and offices. In some such situations, it is less concrete but still very real, in the way “Wall Street” can refer to a phenomenon far more complex than a street in New York City. In the field of psychology, one might speak of the structure of someone’s personality to describe the patterns and responses that individuals have developed over time. In the field of architecture, “structure” refers to a physical artifact. In the field of linguistics, it denotes the grammar, syntax, and logic of a specific language. Yoder’s point in rehearsing these examples is to draw an analogy with the New Testament language of power and the Powers: “The concept ‘structure’ functions to point to the patterns or regularities that transcend or precede or condition the individual phenomena we can immediately

2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:15-17; 2:15, 16; Titus 3:1; and 1 Pet 3:21-4:1. Terms associated with this semantic domain and conceptual field include *archē*, *archōn*, *exousia*, *dynamis*, *kosmokratores*, *kyriotēs*, *onoma*, *pneumatika*, *stoicheia*, and *thronos*. Yoder often uses the generic term “Powers” to refer to this linguistic and conceptual cluster.

⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 137.

perceive...It is this patternedness that the word ‘structure’ tries to enable us to perceive within all the varieties of its appearance. Similarly, ‘power’ points in all its modulations to some kind of capacity to make something happen.”⁸ Yoder willingly acknowledges that the New Testament language of Powers is not always as precise and unambiguous as a systematician might like, but that does not rule out our ability to examine Paul’s meaning when he uses such terms and to understand what he meant.⁹

Before examining Yoder’s interpretation of the Powers, three objections must be answered so that they do not skew a proper understanding of what Yoder is doing in his exousiology:

1. Yoder’s exousiology is based on an Anabaptist bias.
2. Yoder’s exousiology is opposed to the traditional interpretation of the Powers.
3. Yoder’s exousiology is reductionistic and capitulates to contemporary concerns rather than holding to the biblical message as primary.

In answer to the charge of Anabaptist bias, Yoder disavows attempting to do innovative exegesis himself.¹⁰ Indeed, Yoder notes the irony in how critics perceived his Powers chapter in *Politics*: “[Some] Reformed and Evangelical friends discovered that this entire interpretation, drawn almost entirely from European Reformed theologians, was the product of a peculiar Anabaptist bias.”¹¹ If there is an innovation in *Politics*, it is Yoder’s focus on what biblical studies has to say to social ethics, in particular those

⁸ Yoder, *Politics*, 138.

⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 137, n. 2.

¹⁰ See Yoder, *Politics*, 136; and “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 161.

¹¹ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 161. This charge may be due to Yoder’s reading more European Reformed thinkers than many of his English-speaking evangelical and Reformed critics.

ethicists who would claim that Jesus' "radical personalism" or individualism was irrelevant to social and cultural questions.¹² Yoder is adamant that if critics disagree with his exousiology, careful arguments from exegesis of the text and close study of historical-cultural context are needed, not arguments based on guilt by Anabaptist association.¹³

In answer to the charge of opposing the traditional interpretation, Yoder answers that he has yet to find a careful, thorough, and systematic statement of the supposed traditional interpretation. Yoder's commentary on this matter is worth quoting at length:

Although the Berkhof synthesis strikes some people as innovative, one is at a loss to determine just what the tradition was that was being set aside. The various friendly critics who have communicated their objections to me could not direct me to the classical sources where the view they thought it was wrong to set aside had been set forth. For some, the "principalities and powers" were thought to be connected with the demons whom Jesus exorcised, yet the link between the Synoptics and Paul is hardly that clear. For others the connection was with angels or other categories of personal spiritual beings; yet I have not been directed to any standard Evangelical summary statement on the nature of personal spiritual beings and how it is that they function as the adversaries being battled against in Ephesians 6 or triumphed over in Colossians. The advocacy of a modern term like "personal" to describe what is at stake in first century cosmology has not been explained by any of those who appeal to such terms as self-evident. Thus with all readiness to grant that the Berkhof synthesis is subject to review, I must insist on grounds of general method that any *synthesis*, bringing together in a coherent way a body of biblical language, is preferable to an unexamined and unsynthesized set of folk memories never actually scrutinized, and considered to be accurate equivalents of the scriptural thought pattern primarily on the grounds that they had not been tested.¹⁴

Third, and most importantly, Yoder argues that a proper doctrine of the Powers is holistic rather than reductionistic. He makes this case most thoroughly in personal

¹² Yoder, *Politics*, 134.

¹³ Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," 162.

¹⁴ Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth*, 162. Yoder does not deny the existence of demons, since Jesus obviously cast them out, but he points out that the demons of the Gospels are not easily equated with the principalities and powers ("Letter to John Stott," [Dec 7, 1978], 6.)

correspondence with John Stott.¹⁵ Stott worries that many commentators on the Powers are committed to demythologizing Scripture based on modern prejudices. Those scholars therefore latch onto Powers language with reference *solely* to visible societal and political structures, disregarding the spiritual and invisible nature of the Powers.¹⁶ Yoder's response to Stott's concern is illuminating.

Yoder explicitly denies any "demythologizing" work on his own part for the sake of relevance or communication to the modern mindset: "For me there is a vast difference between saying, in conversation with my contemporaries, that Paul should make sense to them on their secular/causal level, and denying with them that there is anything not on their level. That latter denial would for me be logically illegitimate for general philosophical and theological reasons."¹⁷ Yoder thinks that the Bible speaks today, and that an attentive eye to Scripture and a missionary ear to one's culture will see how it does so. This assumption, however, is completely different from the methodological assumption that the reigning worldview of modernity (or any other time period) gets to stand as judge over against Scripture.

¹⁵ Yoder, "Letter to John Stott," (Oct. 27, 1976); "Letter to John Stott," (June 28, 1978); John Stott, "Letter to John H. Yoder," (Oct. 27, 1978); and "Letter to John Stott," (Dec. 7, 1978). These letters are all in the author's possession.

¹⁶ Stott, "Letter to John H. Yoder" (Oct. 27, 1978). Stott's worry is published formally in Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 267-275. In correspondence with Yoder, Stott notes that he deliberately did not include Yoder in the scholars he surveys, in part because of his "high and warm personal regard" for Yoder and out of the desire to avoid the appearance of public controversy.

¹⁷ Yoder, "Letter to John Stott," (Dec. 7, 1978), 3. Yoder also notes that language of the Powers is more nuanced than that of modern social science (Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher [Grand Rapids; Brazos, 2009], 64).

Furthermore, moderns often draw a sharp divide between a host of concepts: visible and invisible, natural and supernatural, immanent and transcendent, secular and religious, politics and spirituality, among others. In terms of the Powers, some commentators (Stott included) frame the debate so that the Powers must be understood as *either* personal, invisible, angelic beings *or* impersonal but visible structures. Yoder argues that this dichotomous way of thinking has to be overcome if we are rightly to read the text of the New Testament. Whereas some modern commentators deny any reference to the invisible and transcendent dimensions in the text, others defend seeing them as referring solely to the invisible and transcendent dimensions. Or, better yet, they cannot see how the two are inextricably linked. Yoder's point is that this sharp divide is itself a characteristic of modern thinking, but not of the biblical text.¹⁸ The solution proffered by Yoder is to see the biblical language of the Powers as

a natural wholesome unity. To pry apart the empirical and more-than-empirical dimensions, which enables you to call the unity [between the two] an uneasy compromise, is itself the fruit of a post-platonic cultural development which has to be debated. I said before that I did not see any of us as denying the "heavenly" dimension, just because we feel that we can move from the first century into ours in identifying the earthly dimension. It is you, not Berkhof and [Markus] Barth, who think that we must choose between the two, and as far as I can see from here you are thinking that on the basis of a post-reformation western cosmology rather than a biblical wholeness.¹⁹

Yoder is not reductionistic because, for Yoder, there are no "merely" empirical or "merely" visible or public institutions. Every institution and every political and cultural practice concentrates and suffuses power—power that enables humans to serve God and

¹⁸ Yoder, "Letter to John Stott," (Dec. 7, 1978), 7-8.

¹⁹ Yoder, "Letter to John Stott," (Dec. 7, 1978), 4.

empower one another or power that attempts to supplant God with idols and overpower other humans and creation. Because both humans and the Powers are dynamic, not static, Yoder provides a complex account of how the power of creation gets warped in the fall and set free in redemption.

Power Given: Creation

The first characteristic of the Powers is that they are rooted in God's good creation and not essentially fallen. Colossians 1:15-17 is a central text: "He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together." Drawing on this text, Yoder asserts that the Powers are part of creation, which is characterized by "the reign of order among creatures, order which in its original intention is a divine gift."²⁰ Yoder further explains, "There could not be society or history, there could not be humanity without the existence above us of religious, intellectual, moral, and social structures. *We cannot live without them.*"²¹ Yoder contends that God's works of creation and providence are not

²⁰ Yoder, *Politics*, 141.

²¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 143. Cf. also Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 83; and "Reformed versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May-June 1985): 6. In case of the objection that the Powers were connected with specifically *political* authorities or powers, it should be remembered that society in biblical times was largely undifferentiated. Hence, as Richard Mouw reminds us, political rulers in biblical times represented not only political and military might, but were also sponsors of the arts and sciences. In addition, they bore an authority that today is differentiated among many different leaders: "the captains of industry; the molders of public opinion in art, entertainment, and sexuality; educational leaders; representatives of family interests; and so on." Cf. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 50.

manifested through a series of arbitrary, immediate or erratic divine interventions, but through the regularity and order of the Powers.²² In this respect, Yoder compares them to orders of creation: “With the Reformed doctrine of the orders of creation, Berkhof’s Paul affirms that all human being is structured, that that structured quality is, itself, not an accident nor the fall, but a part of the divinely given creatureliness so that the whole is always more than its parts.”²³ The Powers are therefore meant to be servants of human flourishing, enabling humans to use their God-given power in the right way and through the right channels.²⁴ It is therefore crucial to see that, for Yoder, “the Powers as such, power in itself, is the good creation of God.”²⁵

Importantly, Yoder uses the term “power” not only as a descriptive term but as normative. This usage reveals a key part of both the origin and essence of what it means to be human.²⁶ Yoder acknowledges that “power” can be used in a variety of ways, most basically to refer to the ability to do just about anything.²⁷ This means that we must always define concretely what we mean when we talk about “power” or “powerlessness.”²⁸ Yoder is keen to emphasize that Jesus “was not interested in either

²² Yoder, *Politics*, 141.

²³ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 162.

²⁴ Yoder, “On Not Being in Charge,” in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 175.

²⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 154.

²⁶ Yoder’s account of human power is strikingly similar to the exegetical conclusions reached by J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

²⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 138.

²⁸ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 156.

approving of power in general or disapproving of power in general. He was interested in exercising the power of love and eschewing the powers of destruction and selfishness.”²⁹ Why did Jesus opt for the one route and not the other? In part, he did so because “some kinds and forms of power are intrinsically good as a celebration of God’s creative purpose, and others are intrinsically fallen as an instrument of pride and self-serving.”³⁰ For Yoder, creational power goes with the grain of the universe, including the power of servanthood,³¹ the power of forgiveness, the power of peoplehood,³² the power of truth-telling, the power of creativity that sees beyond false and fallen dilemmas,³³ the power of a vision of the universe that sees it open to God,³⁴ and, of course, the power and wisdom of the cross.³⁵ Normatively-speaking, fallen “power” is no power at all but simply the hunger for domination.³⁶ This type of power cannot be maintained over the long haul; under it, things fall apart.³⁷ In contrast, Yoder contends, true creational power is the power of love and service, for that is the power of the Creator God and the

²⁹ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 156.

³⁰ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 164.

³¹ Yoder, “The Lordship of Christ and the Power Struggle,” in *The Lordship of Christ*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963), 511; “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 155; and “The Evangelical Mandate for Social Action,” in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 191. Cf. also “Turn, Turn,” in *He Came Preaching Peace: Bible Lectures on Peacemaking* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 137.

³² Yoder, “Jesus and Power,” *The Ecumenical Review* 25 (Oct. 1973): 453.

³³ Yoder, “The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men,” in *For the Nations*, 229.

³⁴ Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 62.

³⁵ Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” *He Came Preaching Peace*, 37-46.

³⁶ See Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 54.

³⁷ Cf. Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 62.

Crucified King: “Our concern should be doxological. It should be commitment to celebrating as inseparable the power and the love of YHWH who is at once the almighty liberator of the slaves, defender of the widow, the orphan, the foreign, and the loving *abba* of Jesus the Anointed. *That* power and *that* love are not opposites...they are two faces of the same reality.”³⁸

The Power of the Word

The goodness of the Powers and the goodness of creation is no surprise, because God is the Creator. As the previous chapter highlights, creation is not only the provenance of the Father but the Son as well. For Yoder, this ontological point has epistemological implications: “What is known in Jesus is what was behind creation.”³⁹

By connecting Christ with creation, the biblical authors did not mean, according to Yoder, that their audience should use Christ simply to rubberstamp their pre-conceived notions about “creation” and “culture.” For Yoder, we see in the incarnation that God calls us to leave some loyalties and practices behind. God calls Abraham out of Chaldea and into a pilgrim posture, and he calls Israel out of imperial Egypt and into the promised land.⁴⁰ Incarnation follows the same pattern as election and exodus in that some ways of living in God’s world are rejected and others are validated. The incarnation therefore does not validate what we already know is the best and highest in human culture apart

³⁸ Yoder, “‘To Your Tents, O Israel’: The Legacy of Israel’s Experience with Holy War,” *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (1989): 362 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Yoder, “Glory in a Tent,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 82.

⁴⁰ Yoder, “Let the Church be the Church,” in *Royal Priesthood*, 172.

from Jesus; it provides the foundation and baseline by which to judge all cultural practices to see if they are in conformity with God's creational intentions for humanity as supremely revealed in Jesus.⁴¹

Yoder's focus on Jesus does not exclude other routes of true knowledge, including the revelatory status of nature, common sense, the lessons of history, and generalizations arising out of the observation of social process. Yoder refuses the notion that "those other kinds of wisdom are to be smashed or cursed."⁴² He argues, instead, that they must be tested against the wisdom of God in Christ. If those other kinds of wisdom are truly from God, then they will line up with Christ. For Yoder, Scripture affirms that God's revelation of himself in creation does not and *cannot* conflict with Jesus.⁴³ Consequently, Yoder charts a close canonically-grounded connection between creation and redemption.

The Gift of Power Given

In the beginning, both the Powers and humanity were without sin. We have no access to Eden and few clues to what it would have been like, but Yoder reflects on what this original goodness of human power and the Powers would have looked like with reference to questions of justice, farming, and family.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See also Yoder, *Politics*, 99.

⁴² Yoder, "Radical Reformation Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 120.

⁴³ Yoder, "Glory in a Tent," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 85-88.

⁴⁴ Yoder acknowledges that thought experiments about the good creation without sin are largely speculative but useful for heuristic purposes. This will be the case no matter the theologian. Yoder stands

First, Yoder addresses the hypothetical question of what prelapsarian society could have been and whether retributive justice would be part of it.⁴⁵ He makes abundantly clear that order and organization are part of God's creational intentions for human life and society.⁴⁶ He notes that, without sin, there would be no one committing offenses and no one making selfish demands for vengeance. There would thus be no need for the sword or for retributive justice. Moreover, distributive justice would entail ensuring that each received his or her share, which each would willingly accept as sufficient. When Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and others cast justice as fundamentally different from and in competition with love, their dichotomy between love and justice is really generated, Yoder notes, by the fall.⁴⁷ These thinkers generally conceive justice solely as a need that emerges on the site of conflict created by sin. In contrast, Yoder points to the possibility of a creationally-rooted justice that is *not* merely about conflict and competition, but cooperation. In this conception, true justice is loving someone or something as it ought to be loved, and true love is giving someone or something its proper due.⁴⁸

out, however, for trying to bring his speculation into conformity with New Testament teachings about Christ's role in creation.

⁴⁵ What follows is a summary of Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 83.

⁴⁶ Yoder, "Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies," 6.

⁴⁷ Cf. Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," in H. Wayne House and John Howard Yoder, *The Death Penalty Debate: Two Opposing Views of Capital Punishment*, Issues of Christian Conscience Series, ed. Vernon Grounds (Dallas: Word, 1991), 143.

⁴⁸ In this way, Yoder's account converges with Augustine in Book 19 of *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Second, Yoder addresses the power of male-female relationships. For Yoder, the first chapters of Genesis present a “vision of social wholeness which is structured matriarchally.”⁴⁹ Several textual points serve to reinforce this: the woman was created in a special act, her creation is described in more detail, she fills a gap that completes the original creation, and the man cannot live without her. The serpent comes to the woman and the man eats the fruit she offers because, on Yoder’s read, she is the decision maker and, as most anthropological models suggest, the culture of gardening and gathering depends on the work of women.⁵⁰ In addition, the task of mothering is by nature one that calls for a loving, ordering, caring nurture.

As a result, the fall is, for Yoder, a fall to male domination. Just as sin introduces strife into human-serpent and human-earth relations, so it produces strife in the male-female relationship. Although he does not romanticize mothering or argue that certain characteristics are “essential” to one gender, Yoder notes that if one compares typical gender stereotypes—authority versus compassion, rationality versus relatedness, manipulation versus interaction, distancing versus identification—with the kind of mutual love exemplified in Jesus and commended by the apostles, the kind of love called for can

⁴⁹ Yoder, “Feminist Theology Miscellany #1: Salvation through Mothering?” available in the General Papers, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Library in Elkhart, Indiana. Cf. Yoder, “You Have it Coming: The Cultural Role of Punishment, An Exploratory Essay,” (Shalom Desktop Publications, 1995), ch. 6, available online at [http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/ CHAPTER_VI.pdf](http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/CHAPTER_VI.pdf) (accessed Aug 19, 2009). By “matriarchy,” Yoder does not mean a mirror image of post-fall patriarchy, but the type of servanthood and care for others seen in Jesus or in the Father, whom, Yoder notes, is no patriarch (Yoder, “Salvation through Mothering?” 6).

⁵⁰ Yoder does not say whose anthropological research he is using.

be mapped onto the “feminine” column of this list.⁵¹ Whatever “dominion” and “power” looked like in male-female relationships before the fall, it looked less like the patriarchal kings of the Gentiles, who lord it over their subjects, and more like the Lord who wept over Jerusalem and longed to be a protective mother hen toward the lost chicks.

Third, Yoder addresses the power involved in humanity’s relation to the earth, plants, and animals.⁵² As vicereagents with God in the garden, the male and female are given responsibilities. The vegetation requires work but also provides food. The animals must be named and ordered. Yoder sees God’s empowering of humanity in the generic *adam*’s naming of the animals. Power and responsibility are given to humanity to extend the “divine creative initiative” by exercising their rationality and language in the ordering process. There is thus both an order to creation and a call to humanity to participate in the ordering processes of creation.⁵³

This kind of dominion or rule, Yoder notes, should not be conflated with the type of alien, violent domination over nature and other humans that appears later in the narrative. In the hospitable environs of the garden, “the fruits are fitting food, the animals are friendly neighbors (not to be eaten, in the vision of Eden); we are capable of ordering

⁵¹ Yoder, “Salvation through Mothering?” 6-7. Yoder often upsets both feminists and patriarchalists in that his egalitarianism sees Scripture as subverting what it means to wield power, rather than simply giving women an equal share of male domination.

⁵² Yoder, “On Generating Alternative Paradigms,” in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WS: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, 1992), 57-58.

⁵³ Yoder, “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58.

this cosmos, and its good is the same as our own.”⁵⁴ Within this order, humans also recognized their limits, which is how Yoder interprets the forbidden tree. The tree is a potent sign that humans are not ultimately in control, but they exercise their God-given power as the image of God. The posture exhibited by humanity in Genesis 1-2 (at least originally) thus looks remarkably Christ-like in that they (at least for a time) did not see Godlikeness as something to be seized, but accepted their proper place as having relative but not absolute power.⁵⁵ This right posture with respect to God allowed them to live in harmony with one another and with creation.

The Power of Faith and Hope

Belief in the foundational goodness of creation and the Creator God is manifest in a further way. In ethical theory, Yoder sees the unity of means and ends growing out of an abiding faith in God as Creator and the cosmos as God’s creation. In two separate works, “The Political Meaning of Hope”⁵⁶ and “The Lessons of Nonviolent Experience,”⁵⁷ Yoder addresses nonviolence in the context of Reinhold Niebuhr’s dilemma between faithfulness and effectiveness. For Niebuhr, the Christian will either be faithful and ineffective or compromising but effective. Yoder explains how overturning

⁵⁴ Yoder, “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58.

⁵⁵ Yoder, “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58. See Yoder’s comments on Philippians 2:5-11 in *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 83-84. Yoder argues that Philippians 2 is not only about the deity of Christ, but about Christ as the Second Adam, in that he refused to grasp after Godlikeness.

⁵⁶ Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 53-65.

⁵⁷ Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, eds. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 353-368.

this false dilemma depends on faith in God and confidence in the goodness of God's creation. Such faith produces a stance of hope—hope that faithfulness to God's ways will not disappoint.

Drawing on Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and James Douglass, Yoder argues that we need not submit to the logic of the social sciences, whose use of “effectiveness” determines Niebuhr's analysis. The alternative, Yoder contends, is to refuse the last word to those sciences and to begin with a view of the cosmos that is bigger than any human tools of analysis. Rather than trying to pick things apart so that we can better manage history, Gandhi, King, and Douglass all *begin* with a “deep commitment to the unity of ends and means.”⁵⁸ Yoder calls this stance “cosmological faith.”⁵⁹ For Yoder, this is faith that God has created his cosmos with a wholeness to it, and therefore any attempt to make sharp divisions between means and ends only makes things fall further apart. Yoder's point is simple but powerful: if the creational nature and destiny of humanity and all of creation is shalom, then the means to that *telos* has to be integrally connected to it.

Paradoxically, because this cosmological faith has a proper vision of the whole and of the telos of creation, it informs truly effective action. Despite the specter of Niebuhrian pragmatism, Yoder refuses to abandon language of “effectiveness.” He does so partly because effectiveness always needs to be defined in terms of the ends it seeks and partly because many forms of violence that claim to be effective are just as much

⁵⁸ Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 364-365. On the practical effect of the problematic divorce between means and ends, see Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 121-123.

⁵⁹ Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 60.

based on faith as his own vision.⁶⁰ At the same time, this faith and hope are supremely un-pragmatic insofar as they are not *grounded* in pragmatism or effectiveness, but in God. That is, ultimately, why shalom works.

To say with King, “love is the most durable power in the world,” or “there is something in the universe that unfolds for justice,” is not to claim a sure insight into the way martyrdom works as a social power, although martyrdom often does that. It is a confessional or kerygmatic statement made by those whose loyalty to Christ (or to universal love, or to *satyagraha*) they understand to be validated by its cosmic ground. Suffering love is not right because it “works” in any calculable short-run way (although it often does). It is right because it goes with the grain of the universe, and that is why *in the long run* nothing else will work.⁶¹

Recognition of the goodness of creation allows us to maintain a deeper faith and a stronger hope that, ultimately, “things hold together.”⁶²

Power Perverted: The Fall

For Yoder, the fall entails the fall of power. Insofar as humans are granted power as God’s viceregents to cultivate his creation in a variety of ways, the fall is also the fall of culture. Things fall apart when the first Adam grasps after power that he should not have. In that act (Yoder compares Philippians 2 and Genesis 3), Adam oversteps his limits. He seeks power that belongs to God alone.⁶³ Before this grasping, the creation was ordered with God as king and humans as his stewards, caring for the garden, the animals,

⁶⁰ Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 361.

⁶¹ Yoder, “The Political Meaning of Hope,” in *War of the Lamb*, 62 (emphasis original).

⁶² Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 365.

⁶³ Yoder, *Preface*, 83-84.

and one another.⁶⁴ The act of rebellion disrupts the power flow, so to speak, and thereby also these relationships: the man and woman are now at odds, the humans and the wisest animal (the serpent) are now at odds, and the humans are at odds with the earth that brings forth their food. Most significantly, Adam and Eve reject their calling to be the *imago Dei*. In other words, the loving, self-giving power that flows from God to humanity is distorted and diverted by the humans. Rather than passing it on, humanity attempts to grasp it, hold it (as if one could hold the raging flood of God's loving power), and divert it. Fallen humans thus distort true power so that it flows to wrong ends, a flow that both produces and is generated by the Powers.

Power(s) Idolized: The Fall of the Powers

Although Yoder argues for the primordial goodness of the Powers, they are fallen.⁶⁵ Instead of helping to hold things together, they divide and conquer humanity (e.g., Rom. 8:38; Eph. 2:2; Col. 2:20; and Gal. 4:3). Because of sin, “the structures which were supposed to be our *servants* have become our *masters* and our *guardians*.”⁶⁶ The Powers, originally meant to be servants of human flourishing, have been absolutized by humanity and invested with ultimate value and meaning that only God should have. Having turned aspects of the good creation into idols, we cannot live *with* them, as they harm and enslave humanity.⁶⁷ This fallenness goes deep according to Yoder: “[it] is

⁶⁴ Yoder, “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58.

⁶⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 141.

⁶⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 141 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 143.

structural: they are warped. It is functional: they do not do their duty. It is noetic: we are not able to perceive by looking at things as they are what they really should be.”⁶⁸ Just as the creational reality of the Powers is more than the sum of their parts, so the fallenness of the Powers is not merely the result of fallen individuals exercising power.

Yoder is clear about the devastation wrought by the fall on power and the Powers. He is equally clear, however, about the enduring reality of their createdness and God’s providence.⁶⁹ Even in their fallenness, the Powers continue to “exercise an ordering function.”⁷⁰ Why is this? Simply put, because their creational nature is *more* essential, more primordial, than their fallen perversion. Creation is more basic (ontologically) and prior (temporally) to the fall of the Powers.⁷¹

Acknowledging the accidental (rather than essential) nature of the Powers’ fallenness also clarifies a key issue about the relationship of the Powers to chaos.⁷² Yoder asserts that, though fallen, the Powers can have a preserving influence because, like humanity, they cannot escape the reality of their creatureliness—a reality that God uses to

⁶⁸ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 163.

⁶⁹ This answers J. Budziszewski’s charge that Yoder ignores God’s providence via the natural law inherent in creation. Budziszewski, “Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought,” 104. Although his footnotes show he has read this section of Yoder, he does not appear to have read it very closely nor has he consulted Yoder’s other relevant works on this point. As Ashley Woodiwiss indicates, Budziszewski’s reading of Yoder does not qualify as either a thorough or careful scholarly analysis of Yoder. Woodiwiss, “John Howard Yoder and a Church-Centered Political Theory,” in *Evangelicals in the Public Square*, 189-190.

⁷⁰ Yoder, *Politics*, 141.

⁷¹ Guenther Haas mistakenly claims that Yoder sees creation and fall dialectically. Haas, “The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures,” 115-116. It is true that, after the fall, the Powers are simultaneously good and evil, but most Reformed thinkers claim that as well. At several points, Yoder states that the most basic characteristic of the Powers (ontologically, sequentially, or otherwise) is their createdness.

⁷² See Richard Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 94.

preserve creation from absolute chaos.⁷³ So “our lostness and our survival are inseparable, both dependent upon the Powers.”⁷⁴ Consequently, the relationship of humanity to the Powers cannot be reduced to wholesale affirmation or rejection.⁷⁵ Rather, there is a complicated process of discerning, engaging, and living out the gospel in relationship to the Powers.⁷⁶

Complexity is why New Testament exousiology is preferable, for Yoder, to traditional notions of orders of creation.⁷⁷ Rather than the more static model of the orders of creation, the Powers are dynamic. The doctrine of the Powers describes the present state of the Powers as created, fallen, and still under God’s providential control. Often, creation orders have been conceived in a static way, with certain institutions having a kind of Platonic essence that remains untouched by human sin and history and simply needs to be instantiated in reality.⁷⁸ Yoder suggests that the Powers are more malleable and dynamic, in that they interface with human choice and responsibility, influencing and being influenced by humanity.⁷⁹ Adam was both placed in a world not of his own making and commanded to play a role in ordering that world. Even after disobeying God, he did

⁷³ Yoder, *Politics*, 143.

⁷⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 143.

⁷⁵ Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 45, 52.

⁷⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 155.

⁷⁷ The following summarizes Yoder, *Politics*, 144.

⁷⁸ See Yoder’s comments on the state in *Politics*, 193.

⁷⁹ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 164.

not cease to be human or to exercise an ordering function, albeit to the wrong ends. That same dynamic is what produces the current state of affairs.

The complex interface between humanity and the Powers has two implications. First, the solution to the problem of power and the Powers is not simply to get a redeemed person in the proper office of a still-essentially-good creation order. That is not enough.⁸⁰ As Cornelius Plantinga puts it (offering a gloss on Hendrik Berkhof), “Mere personal goodness cannot lick them.”⁸¹ Something more has to happen: the Powers themselves have to be defeated. Second, because the Powers are dynamic, human actors have real power. If we are aware that something could be otherwise, we will not deify (or demonize) any particular institution. We will also be aware of our own responsibility to potentially act otherwise than a Power dictates. This explains why Reinhold Niebuhr’s “tragic necessity” is no necessity at all, but the problematic imagination that humans *must* do something contrary to humanity’s creational nature and the way of Jesus.⁸² For Yoder, the real tragedy is seeing any fallen behavior as necessary for life in God’s world.

The tragedy of the fall manifests itself in a legion of social, cultural, and political ways. Whereas in creation we are called to worship God and serve others, in a fallen state, we esteem some created good above God. Consequently, we offer up other persons as sacrifices to various causes, ideas, and forces—including the Powers. The result,

⁸⁰ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 165.

⁸¹ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God’s World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 64.

⁸² For the phrase “tragic necessity,” see Robert McAfee Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xviii.

according to Yoder, is that “general labels like ‘freedom’ or ‘justice,’ ‘socialism’ or ‘capitalism,’ ‘order’ or ‘humanism’ become positive or negative values *in their own right*, causes to combat for or to destroy. The modern word for this is ‘ideology.’ The biblical word that fits best is probably ‘idol.’”⁸³ Yoder’s point is not that we ought to get rid of certain causes or concepts, institutions or practices, but that they must be rightly ordered. The Powers are meant to be powerful as humans are meant to be powerful, inasmuch as they serve and not lord it over humanity. To exalt any Power as ultimate and independent from God is to engage in idolatry, which will eventually consume both the idolaters and those whom they sacrifice upon the altar of these Powers-turned-gods.

Power Diverted: The Fall of Culture

The fall of human power and the Powers drastically affects culture. Yoder’s comments on the origins of culture are often cryptic, but some things can be gleaned from his narration of the early chapters of Genesis. The power and ordering role of humanity in the Garden does not go away. It does, however, result in humans developing creation and ordering their lives in a self-aggrandizing way, such that we are out of tune not only with God but with our fellow humans and the rest of the biophysical creation. The fall of culture can be seen in Yoder’s gloss on the narrative of Adam, Abel, Cain, and Cain’s descendents.⁸⁴

⁸³ Yoder, “The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men,” in *For the Nations*, 232 (emphasis added).

⁸⁴ Yoder addresses this narrative most fully in “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58-59, and “The Voice of Your Brother’s Blood,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 57-68. The following summary is taken from these two texts.

Adam worked in the garden in harmony with the earth and its produce, a model that Yoder sees at work in many Anabaptist and Amish farming communities. Adam's caretaking and order-keeping, however, was without postlapsarian toil.⁸⁵ In this sense, prelapsarian agriculture (and thereby the root of culture) was in tune with the biophysical creation and God's creative intent for human life. Insofar as Cain tills the soil and harvests the crops, his work continues that of Adam. After the fall, however, the relationship of harmony and fruitful abundance has been replaced with a struggle, a scratching open of the earth in order to survive. Thus, both Adam and Cain's postlapsarian cultivating is ambivalent, close to nature but not natural. Yoder nevertheless contends that tilling and harvesting are no sin. In fact, the vocation of farmer requires one to be keenly in tune with the earth, the rhythms of the seasons, and the need for crop adjustments.

Abel, however, was even more in line with God's creation and creative intent for human life. As a shepherd, he is a throwback to the prelapsarian attunement of humanity to the rest of creation. He wisely moves his flock to find vegetation and watering places that the earth provides. This pilgrim culture, Yoder suggests, is closer to God's original intent for human life and harmony with the earth than is Cain's. For Yoder, Abel's nomadic shepherding suggests a wisdom and harmony with what the earth gives forth, whereas Cain's farming wounds the earth in order to wrest sustenance from it.

Importantly, Cain's sin is not his farming, but his refusal to recognize Abel's

⁸⁵ Yoder states that "Adam makes the transition from nature to culture." Cf. "On Generating Alternative Paradigms," 59. From the context, it is impossible to tell whether Yoder is speaking of a prelapsarian or postlapsarian transition.

practice was closer to God's original intentions for human life.⁸⁶ Rather than respond by seeking greater conformity with God's creational intent, Cain murders his brother, thereby furthering the divide between himself and his brother, the earth, and God.

The virtue of caretaking is all of a piece, so when Cain shows himself to be an unfaithful keeper of his brother, he shows himself to be an unfaithful cultivator of the earth.⁸⁷ In being hostile to his brother, he makes the fields hostile to him. The accusation of the soil forces him to flee to the city. From there, Cain's story and lineage go on to provide the basic components of history, including the protective threat of vengeance (the state), the city (civilization), the arts (Jubal's music), technology (Tubal-Cain's metallurgy), and war (Lamech's escalating vengeance). Yoder notes that this is all done in the line of Cain and suggestively states that "urbanization—the creation of cities—with the representative skills of metalworking and music—is seen as the culmination not of human solidarity or of reconciliation but of estrangement. The city is not the product of a town's growing large; it is found by a fugitive. From this we could develop a whole book about the theology of culture."⁸⁸ This civilizing process took place, according to Genesis 4:16, "away from the presence of the LORD." This line of Cain, the unfaithful cultivator, developed culture.

⁸⁶ Yoder is merely suggestive here and does not spell out precisely what he means. On the face of it, the vegetarianism of Cain seems preferable to the flock-herding of Abel. Clearly, the killing of animals (for sacrifices or for food) is a postlapsarian phenomenon. But since God does not grant permission to eat animals until Genesis 9:3, does Yoder think that Abel's shepherding was not for the sake of eating the flocks, but simply caring for the animals and helping them find food wherever they could? That would seem to be the only plausible explanation that would make sense of Yoder's statements in this text.

⁸⁷ Yoder, "The Voice of Your Brother's Blood," 62.

⁸⁸ Yoder, "The Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 59.

The power God gave to humanity in creation is thus warped when it gets woven into the cultural life of humanity. For Yoder, there is no culture “as such” or institutions “as such” beyond the touch of history. The only culture and cultural institutions humans have ever known, therefore, are fraught with deep ambivalence. Despite such ambivalence, two additional points are worth noting.

First, the story of Cain is not only about sin but about grace. In response to Cain’s sin, God offers a mark of preserving grace. The ambivalence of Cain and Cain’s line is therefore just that: ambivalence, not pure, unadulterated evil. Second, the prophetic vision of redeemed life has a clear place for civilization and technology, a culture that hearkens back to prelapsarian attunement with God and non-human creation. “To civilize,” Yoder notes, is to transfer knowledge and to educate someone. When Micah 4:2 speaks of the nations learning the ways of the Lord, this is true civilization, not just sheer technical knowledge but a moral knowledge that enables humanity to live as it ought in relation to God, other humans, and all creation. In a fascinating observation, Yoder notes, “The skills of smelting and smithing will be devoted no more to arming but to farming. The sharp edges will still be needed. In fact the edge of an agricultural implement needs to last longer and to cut more often than a weapon. So to make coulters instead of swords, and pruning knives instead of spears, will mean a technological advance, not a slowing down... Thus the prophets’ vision is not primitivism or ‘back to nature.’ It calls for the more expert and more productive use of the skills of smelter and smith.”⁸⁹ The hope for the prophets is neither a disembodied heaven nor a romantic utopia, but the

⁸⁹ Yoder, “The Hilltop City,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 99.

“transformation of human existence within and not beyond its economic, cultural, and political nature.”⁹⁰ This hope for transformation does not go unfulfilled.

Power Unleashed: Redemption

Creation involves using the power given by God to humanity in accord with God’s will to perpetuate shalom among humanity and all creation. The fall involves the diversion of the flow of power, such that humanity erects idols and thereby either pursues the wrong ends or pursues apparently good ends by using wrong means. Redemption, for Yoder, is neither the annihilation of the Powers nor the eradication of human power. Instead, redemption is the rehabilitation of authentic human power and thereby the Powers. Redemption entails that we walk by faith that there is an ultimate unity of ends and means, of creation and redemption, and of Father, Son, and Spirit. Redemption means that we see Jesus and, in seeing him, we see that all things hold together in him.

The Power of Jesus

How does the redemptive work of Christ relate to the Powers? Jesus does not let the fallen Powers dictate his life; he lives independently of their idolatrous pull. Although he was *subordinate* to their rule, he did not *submit* to their rule, a fact that led to his victory and established his rule over the Powers.⁹¹ Furthermore, he also resisted the greatest temptation the Powers could offer: the illusion that he could attain a good end by less-than-righteous means. For Jesus, loving God and his neighbor was more important

⁹⁰ Yoder, “The Hilltop City,” in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 101.

⁹¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 144-145.

than serving any Power. Because the Powers were originally meant to be servants of humanity's call to love God, other humans, and all creation, Jesus refused to let them gain mastery over him and would not sacrifice his neighbor to any Power, a refusal seen most clearly in his rejection of holy war against Rome.⁹² Jesus' scandalous claim is that even the Roman enemy is not to be sacrificed to any Power, because in sacrificing another human being to a Power, one abandons the call to love, in which humanity and all creation is held together.⁹³ Jesus thus renounces the task of social engineering: "In the Spirit of God, the jealous God who wants us to serve none other, there is no such disincarnate or ideal value worthy to demand the sacrifice of the concrete personal and communal values of our real neighbor. Those abstractions will remain valuable in the measure in which they help us better serve our neighbors. They become sinful when we are asked to sacrifice our neighbors to them."⁹⁴ To modify Jesus' words, humanity was not made for the Powers, but the Powers were made for humanity.

Jesus' rejection of the *fallen* "Powers that be" is neither a rejection of the Powers as such nor of creation. Indeed, since the Powers are part of creation, God cannot and will not destroy, set aside, or ignore the Powers.⁹⁵ Redemption must be, as Yoder explicitly

⁹² Yoder, *Politics*, 141.

⁹³ Yoder, *Politics*, 45-53.

⁹⁴ Yoder, "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 232.

⁹⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 144.

says, the “redemption of creation.”⁹⁶ This can be seen in Yoder’s discussion of the power exercised by Jesus. As very God and very man, Jesus unfurls the true power given to humanity. The church marches under the banner of the champion and pioneer of the true humanity, who exercises the power of creation as the true *imago Dei*.

Some might be skeptical about characterizing Yoder this way, because sometimes he sounds like he is rejecting the notion of power and historical agency. That is, he seems to be accepting Reinhold Niebuhr’s faithfulness-effectiveness dichotomy, and opting for the faithfulness side. For example, Yoder declares that “Jesus was so faithful to the enemy-love of God that it cost him all his effectiveness,”⁹⁷ that Jesus abandoned “any obligation to be effective in making history move down the right track,”⁹⁸ and that Jesus, and his disciples following him “accept powerlessness.”⁹⁹ If taken on their own, such statements could be construed as advocating withdrawal from society, culture, and politics, and preferring “pure” obedience to the divine command over active involvement in society and culture. Accordingly, Yoder could be interpreted as arguing that both Jesus and his disciples renounce all agency and power in history and culture. Yet this would be a misreading of Yoder.

Yoder makes abundantly clear that Jesus, as Messiah, as the true *imago Dei*, and as the true human, does not reject power but reveals how to exercise the right kind of

⁹⁶ Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 61 (emphasis added). Budziszewski again shows that he has not read Yoder closely when he states, “It does not seem to enter his reasoning that redemption means the redemption of creation” (“Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought,” 105).

⁹⁷ Yoder, *Politics*, 233.

⁹⁸ Yoder, *Politics*, 235.

⁹⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 237.

power.¹⁰⁰ Jesus is both unique incarnation and normative human being. As a man, the chief question Jesus faced, according to Yoder, was what kind of king or ruler he would be.¹⁰¹ This is seen in the temptation narratives discussed in the previous chapter. For Yoder, Jesus did not renounce power, but redefined what true power is, in contrast to the temptations. Indeed, Jesus' temptation highlights that Yoder sees Jesus' entire life, death, resurrection, and ascension in terms of the right exercise of power: what kind of ruler will God's chosen one be?

This question is not just about what it means to be Israel's rightful king; it is about what it means *to be human*. Jesus' kingship was unique, but it was also prototypical of what it means to be human.¹⁰² Adam was given dominion and called to exercise power in the proper way: loving care for the rest of creation and loving reciprocity with the woman, with whom he shares the divine image. Importantly, exercising power is not just the task of a select few.¹⁰³ It is constitutive of what it means to be human. Adam and Eve were God's delegates and representatives to the rest of creation as the *imago Dei*. Adam misused his power, however, by grasping after godlikeness. So when Jesus faces down the tempter, this time in the desert rather than the garden, he is not merely opting for a different way of being Israel's messiah or king; he is opting for a different way of being human. Jesus, who had every reason to consider himself equal with God, gave up that

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Yoder, "Jesus and Power," 453.

¹⁰¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 25.

¹⁰² The following paragraph draws upon Yoder, *Preface*, 81-84.

¹⁰³ Cf. Richard Middleton's examination of this point in the historical and cultural context of the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1 (*The Liberating Image*, 93-184).

right in order to exercise true power—the power of loving, self-giving servanthood. The power of God is thus seen most clearly in the cross and resurrection. This speaks volumes about what it means to be the *imago Dei* and what it means to follow Jesus.

This power is not confined to Jesus alone because, as Yoder notes, Jesus is the “firstfruits of authentic restored humanity.”¹⁰⁴ Because Jesus is truly and fully human, his humanity affects ours. Thus, “Jesus is Son of God in a sense not completely distinct from our being sons and daughters of God.”¹⁰⁵ Yoder is not trying to downplay the uniqueness of Jesus but to honor the language of John 1:12, which states, “But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name;” and Romans 8:29, which states, “For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brethren.” Because of Jesus’ kingship, Christians can participate in his reign as a royal priesthood and priestly kingdom. This kingdom does not abdicate power but taps into the source of true power: “Jesus did not free His disciples from violence to make them pure and weak, but because He called them to use other, stronger resources.”¹⁰⁶ Consequently, the church does not ask “[whether] to enter or to escape the realm of power, but what kinds of power are in conformity with the victory of the

¹⁰⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 145.

¹⁰⁵ Yoder, *Preface*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Yoder, “Jesus and Power,” 453.

Lamb.”¹⁰⁷ Although some may call this type of power “weakness,” the point is not linguistic but Christological: “When [Jesus] prefers servanthood to domination, as His path and therefore ours, it is immaterial whether we call that ‘powerlessness’ or ‘omnipotence’; it is God’s way.”¹⁰⁸

The Power of Creation

If Jesus re-connects and restores the original power that humanity was called to exercise in creation, then the politics of Jesus is nothing less than the power of creation unleashed to fulfill God’s original intent. It cannot be emphasized enough that this crucial point is repeated by Yoder in a multitude of ways and variety of contexts. Living in line with the Lamb’s victory is not alien or in contradiction to creation, but coheres with creation at the most basic level. Because God created the world and continues to be involved in history, creation is from the beginning oriented toward an “open future,” ruling out system-immanent ethical reasoning.¹⁰⁹ Our hope in and obedience to God is thus not “groundless optimism,”¹¹⁰ but trust in God’s promise that “an ethic of *torah* or *halakah*, or an ethic of discipleship” is more rooted in the true “nature of things” than is social engineering.¹¹¹ Jesus’ acceptance of the cross and resurrection was, according to

¹⁰⁷ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 167. Cf. Yoder, *Politics*, 148: “What can be called the ‘otherness of the church’ is an attitude rooted in strength and not in weakness. It consists in being a herald of liberation and not a community of slaves.”

¹⁰⁸ Yoder, “Jesus and Power,” 454. For example, Marva J. Dawn prefers the language of weakness Cf. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁰⁹ Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 125-126.

¹¹⁰ Yoder, “The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men,” in *For the Nations*, 230.

¹¹¹ Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 126.

Yoder, *both* an eschatological decision based on where God is taking the world *and* an ontological, creational decision based on “a truer picture of what the world *really* is.”¹¹² Thus, Jesus’ call to follow his path of cross and resurrection is “ontologically founded, connected to the arc from creation to apocalypse.”¹¹³

This coherence between the politics of Jesus and the power of creation means that nature and grace are not oppositional, but complementary:¹¹⁴ “The way of discipleship is the way for which we are made; there is no other ‘nature’ to which grace is a *superadditum*.”¹¹⁵ In other words, “the behavior God calls for is not alien to us; it expresses what we really are made to be.”¹¹⁶ Yoder wants to make sure that we are defining nature as *creational* rather than as *fallen*:

When society has been defined as the nation and social order as patriarchy, then it is no longer true that grace completes nature; in the face of that definition of “nature,” the word of YHWH has to be like a fire, like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces. Yet when the “nature of things” is properly defined, the organic relationship to grace is restored. The cross is not a scandal to those who know the world as God sees it, but only to the pagans, who look for what they call wisdom, or the Judaeans, who look for what they call power. This is what I meant before, when I stated that the choice of Jesus was ontological: it risks an option in favor of the restored vision of how things really are... The cross is neither foolish nor weak, but natural.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Yoder, “Are You the One Who is to Come?” in *For the Nations*, 211.

¹¹³ Yoder, “That Household We Are,” 7.

¹¹⁴ Contrary to J. Daryl Charles, who thinks that Yoder differs from the Roman Catholic position by pitting nature and grace against one another (“Protestants and Natural Law,” 36).

¹¹⁵ Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 36.

¹¹⁶ Yoder, “Are You the One Who Is to Come?” in *For the Nations*, 212.

¹¹⁷ Yoder, “Are You the One Who Is to Come?” in *For the Nations*, 212. Cf. Ernst Troeltsch’s distinction between two meanings of “natural law.” There is an *absolute* natural law, applying to the primitive state as the law of humanity’s unfallen nature, and a *relative* or secondary natural law, which applies to humanity’s fallen state. This relative natural law is both the result of sin and (limited) remedy to

This view of creation explains why cross-bearers are the ones working with the grain of the universe.¹¹⁸ This does not mean, for Yoder, that suffering is somehow good as an end in itself.¹¹⁹ Rather, it means that the shalom of creation is regained only by self-giving love, which in a postlapsarian world most generally means suffering, as attested supremely by Jesus but also by mothers and martyrs, farmers and prophets.¹²⁰ Thus, to truly be the *imago Dei*, we must follow the path of *imitatio Christi*.¹²¹ Yoder states, “In our access to it [shalom], it looks more like Jesus than like Eden, more like Jesus than like the feudal order that Luther called “creation,” or the bourgeois order that Kuyper called “creation,” or the racist order that Botha calls “creation”; but that does not mean we need to choose between creation and redemption. It means rather that the disjunction is wrong, as those definitions of creation are wrong, as any definitions of creation based on the way things are [i.e. in the fallen world] must be wrong.”¹²²

What is revealed, renewed, and restored in the politics of Jesus is therefore nothing less than the politics of creation. We cannot see the pristine creation, we cannot see the fullness of the eschaton, but we do see Jesus. His resurrection and ascension, which validate his kingship, are the proof that *libido dominandi* is no power at all, but

sin (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. [1931; repr., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992], 1:158-164).

¹¹⁸ Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 58

¹¹⁹ Yoder notes this in several places, including Yoder, *Politics*, 96, 129, 236, 238.

¹²⁰ Yoder, “Are You the One Who is to Come?” in *For the Nations*, 212.

¹²¹ I owe this way of phrasing the matter to J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 1 (1994): 24.

¹²² Yoder, “Creation and Gospel,” 10. Yoder goes on to note that “The same must be said of today’s much-used disjunction of peace and justice within which some today seek to discuss ‘liberation.’”

one of the basest forms of enslavement.¹²³ The kingdom of the One who comes and tabernacles among us is a kingdom that endures, while the kings and empires of the past and present are ground to dust through their vain attempts to construct kingdoms that go against the universe's grain.

Power Re-enlisted: Transforming Culture

Because God is sovereign and because Jesus is Lord, the Powers can be put to use. “[They] are not merely defeated in their claim to sovereignty, and humbled,” according to Yoder, “they are also reenlisted in the original creative purpose of the service of humanity and the praise of God.”¹²⁴ Some Christians point to the work of the Father in creation and are naively optimistic about the Powers; others point to the work of the Son in redemption and are naively pessimistic about the Powers. Yoder's alternative is not “Christian realism,” but creational and Christological realism. The possibility for Christian engagement with the Powers is not based solely on a doctrine of creation *apart from* Christ but from the proclamation of the good news that in the cross and resurrection, something has substantially been changed in the relationship between humanity, God, and the Powers. This change is as broad in scope as creation: “Because Christ the risen Lord rules not only over the church which is his body, but also over the world which is the terrain of his combat, this approach does yield the wherewithal for talking beyond the confines of the church. Its relevance is not limited to those who believe in Jesus or even

¹²³ Cf. Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 155-156; and Augustine, *City of God*, 19.15.

¹²⁴ Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 61. It is a misreading of Yoder to say that “Christ does not redeem the Powers,” as Guenther Haas does (“The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures,” 116).

to those who hear about Him.”¹²⁵ The transformed relationship between Christ and the Powers, and thus a transformed relationship between *humanity* and the Powers, results in the possibility of the authentic transformation of culture.¹²⁶ God’s intentions for his creation can once again be fully pursued. For Yoder, the Powers are re-enlisted as the following takes place.

First, the church proclaims Christ’s victory over the Powers in word and deed. The gospel is good news, which requires heralds. Christians therefore report “the meaning of an event rippling out from Golgotha” to those who have not yet heard.¹²⁷ This reporting assumes that God’s will for human life can be known.¹²⁸ It is known because God has revealed it in Scripture, which provides the standard by which we are able to judge ourselves.¹²⁹ This task is always done with fear and trembling, but also with faith that the Spirit continues to lead the church. If the church denies that God’s will can be known, it is not clear what exactly it has to offer to the world, for that denial would compromise both its message about the person and work of Christ and its message about Christian discipleship. Without Scripture as a “bar and a fulcrum not of [our] own making,” transformation then becomes a muddled and muddied term that justifies cultural

¹²⁵ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 164.

¹²⁶ Cf. Yoder’s chapter entitled “Christ Transforming Culture,” in H. Wayne House and Yoder, *The Death Penalty Debate* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 153.

¹²⁷ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 164.

¹²⁸ Yoder, “Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in *Authentic Transformation*, 71.

¹²⁹ Yoder, “Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in *Authentic Transformation*, 77.

capitulation rather than being a concrete message with real criteria for the church's life and practice in particular cultures.¹³⁰

The church not only reports a message; its life together *is* a message.¹³¹ The very presence of the church constitutes a witness to the Powers that their sovereignty has been broken. For example, the unity of the Jew and Greek together in one body is a visible proclamation to the Powers that Christ is Lord.¹³² This sanctification is based on the Incarnation and the ongoing work of the Spirit: "the possibility of obedience is therefore a statement not about our own human capabilities, but about the fullness of the humanity of Jesus and the believers' identity with Him through the Spirit in the church."¹³³ Empowered by the Spirit, the church learns new ways of being cultural and political, including how power ought to be used, how to deal with conflict, how to use material goods in a proper way, and so on. As it does this, the church's life together constitutes both a new cultural option within the wider society and a body that seeks the peace of the city in which it is found.¹³⁴

As the church proclaims Christ's victory in word and deed, the Powers must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Given the creational realities of historical development and cultural diversity, Christians should not expect that their dealing with

¹³⁰ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 77.

¹³¹ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 72-73.

¹³² See Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth*, 165; *Body Politics*, 29-30; and *Politics*, 218-223.

¹³³ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 73.

¹³⁴ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 75; and *Politics*, 154. This point is more fully explored in the next chapter.

different facets of culture will be uniform. There is no reason, biblically or theologically, to assume that if we affirm one particular instantiation of culture then we must affirm them all:

There have been those who confound creation and fall, society and the state, the plowshares and the sword, and conclude that he who refuses to be a soldier should cease to farm as well, since responsibility for culture is all of a piece; that to reject usury is to condemn property, or that to censure nationalism is to emigrate. From such alternatives we are freed; we serve our brethren culturally, rejoicing in the grace of creation, without deifying culture; we serve our adversaries nonresistantly, rejoicing in the grace of the cross.¹³⁵

Yoder contends that God's judgment "redeems ('transforms') the Principalities and Powers by rescinding their claimed autonomy. It transforms them by denying their monolithic unity in favor of discerning discrimination."¹³⁶ Following Christ requires constant discernment that can never be jettisoned in favor of a typological answer to all potential scenarios. As a result, "sometimes the power of servanthood will be exercised in the face of the wider society's pressure as an intractable nonconformity, sometimes as an attractive alternative paradigm. Sometimes Caesar will encounter conditional subordination, sometimes conscientious support, sometimes disobedience, sometimes (though seldom) a provisional takeover, sometimes an exodus."¹³⁷ The church must discern in the power of the Spirit how it can live in conformity to the Word in each particular time, place, and culture.

¹³⁵ Yoder, "The Lordship of Christ and the Power Struggle," 511-512. Cf. "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth*, 167.

¹³⁶ Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation*, 76.

¹³⁷ Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth*, 167.

Yoder's "asymmetrical," rather than monolithic, approach to the Powers and culture is required, *not* because of a disjunction between creation and Christ, but because of the fall. For Yoder, some areas of culture are more damaged by the fall than others: "what we take to be typical of some realms of creatureliness may be farther from the original divine purpose than what we take to be definitional for others. It may be that when we define the state as quintessentially the sword, and define the family as a covenant of permanent monogamy, the latter definition is closer to God's original purpose for human sociality than is the former."¹³⁸ Yoder's mention of "God's original purpose" for human sociality is important. The proclamation of God's kingdom is not only a *new* creation, but is a reinstatement of "God's original intent."¹³⁹ The re-enlisting of the Powers is thus a *new* creation, a *new* age dawning in the midst of the old insofar as this establishes social and cultural relationships "as they were meant to be" in the creative intent of God.¹⁴⁰ This re-opens the possibility for humans to use their God-given power in right relation to God, other humans, and all creation. Like the church's looping back to the Bible in order to move forward to the future, this affirmation of God's intent in creation does not seek "to take history 'back to Go' but rather enables authentic

¹³⁸ Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth*, 165. Interestingly, Yoder's distinction between the family and the sword-bearing state bears similarities to both Augustine and Abraham Kuyper. See Augustine, *City of God*, 19.15 and Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 91. Budziszewski is thus mistaken when he states that Yoder lumps the institutions of marriage, family, slavery, and the state all together, as though there are no distinction between them ("Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," 114-115).

¹³⁹ Yoder, *Preface*, 246.

¹⁴⁰ Yoder, *Preface*, 246.

progress.”¹⁴¹ Because “Jesus is both the Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord (‘sitting at the right hand’),” humanity’s calling in redemption to pioneer, renew, and reform culture stands in fundamental continuity with humanity’s original creational calling. The politics of creation are most fully revealed in the power of Jesus.

Power Re-gifted: The *Haustafeln*

What does this power look like when fleshed out in concrete social situations? Although Yoder’s notion of “Revolutionary Subordination” is controversial and often seen as reinforcing social conservatism, I propose that a careful reading of Yoder provides a helpful starting point to see how human power gets refashioned in light of Christ.¹⁴² Thus, the question is not *if* but *how* and *to what end* power is used.

The *Haustafeln*, or “household codes,” of the New Testament are generally perceived to be socially and culturally conservative with regard to the family and social roles.¹⁴³ Admittedly, from very early on in church history, these texts have been interpreted this way. Hence, it is not unusual to find the New Testament authors being charged with conservatism, patriarchy, and oppression. Yoder, however, offers an alternative interpretation. In contrast to a revolution that simply offers a mirror image of oppression¹⁴⁴ or a position that justifies oppressive hierarchies, Yoder’s revolutionary

¹⁴¹ Yoder, “The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King,” in *For the Nations*, 140, n.29.

¹⁴² Yoder, “Revolutionary Subordination,” in *Politics*, 162-192.

¹⁴³ The relevant texts are Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; and 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7.

¹⁴⁴ This type of “revolution” is succinctly summarized in W. B. Yeats’ “The Great Day”: “Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot! / A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot / Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again! / The beggars have changed places but the lash goes on.”

subordination arguably re-connects with the mutually empowering power of creation and opens the way for creative, loving transformation. The *Haustafeln* give direction on how Christ-like, creational power should be manifested in concrete relationships.

The first question Yoder addresses is *who* exercises power. Significantly, these texts assume that all humans are called to exercise power and historical agency, not just those who are in places of privilege. So the admonitions of the *Haustafeln* are addressed first to those considered “subject” according to the culture of that day: the slave before the master, the children before the parents, the wives before the husbands.¹⁴⁵ In other words, the *Haustafeln* empower the underdog: “Here we have a faith that assigns *personal moral responsibility to those who had no legal or moral status* in their culture, and makes them decision makers.”¹⁴⁶ According to Scripture, the status of these persons is *not* in fact defined by an idolatrous Power such as slavery or patriarchy. Those Powers cannot define the Christian. In appealing first to slaves, women, and children, the *Haustafeln* assume and affirm Christ’s victory over the Powers. Power does not simply work its way down from Caesar above, but grows up from below.¹⁴⁷ This dynamic, Christ-like agency shows that *all* human beings are viable movers of history, demythologizes a reductionistic view of power, and emphasizes that, to those members of

¹⁴⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 171.

¹⁴⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, 172 (emphasis original).

¹⁴⁷ Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” 53.

society least likely to view themselves as bearers of power or history, God says, “You *are* powerful, you *are* important, you *are* the bearers of the true meaning of history.”¹⁴⁸

The subordinate persons addressed by the *Haustafeln* become truly free when they are enabled to love freely, just as Jesus loves. This reveals *to what ends* the power of Jesus works. By loving freely those who least deserve it, this power opens the possibility that the oppressive relationship will be broken and transformed, thereby setting creation and history “on the move” again toward its proper *telos*.¹⁴⁹ Far from constituting a message of bondage and oppression, this call to moral agency is a freeing and empowering vision. Revolutionary subordination is not a matter of cultural capitulation to oppressive structures, but a way of following Christ who, being free, freely humbled himself and gave himself for us, in order to demonstrate the way of love.

The *Haustafeln* do not, however, simply call the subject party to be subordinate. *Who* can exercise the power of Jesus is not limited; thus the household codes turn things around, “calling the *dominant* partner in the relationship to a kind of subordination in turn...that the call to subordination is *reciprocal* is once again a revolutionary trait.”¹⁵⁰ In other words, this ethic of power is mutually empowering. For husbands, fathers, and masters to follow this code of ethics would have been even more revolutionary than for wives, children, and slaves. The power of Jesus, according to Yoder, is not about

¹⁴⁸ Based on observations from time in South Africa, Yoder comments that the powerless and marginalized often agree with the myth of the ruler as paradigm of moral decision making. Yoder, “The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 210, n. 7.

¹⁴⁹ Both 1 Corinthians 7:16 and 1 Peter 3:1 point to the goal of winning over a non-Christian spouse.

¹⁵⁰ Yoder, *Politics*, 177 (original emphasis).

attaining a status or maintaining a status quo. Just as wives, children, and slaves can recognize the malleable rather than static nature of the Powers, so husbands, fathers, and masters should recognize that there is no reality to which they must conform more basic than the reign of Christ.¹⁵¹ Although Yoder does not engage the epistle to Philemon extensively, this text provides a prime example of revolutionary subordination.

When Paul writes to Philemon, he could have appealed to his apostleship and his authority in the church to command Philemon to receive his runaway slave Onesimus with love rather than with vengeance. Paul does not do this. Instead, he appeals to something more basic: he, Philemon, and Onesimus are all on the same level, brothers in Christ bound by love and mutual service (vv. 7, 20). Providentially, Onesimus serves Paul on Philemon's behalf, as it were (v. 13), and Paul sends Onesimus back precisely because he affirms that service in the body of Christ springs from the fount of freely given love (v.14). Must Philemon punish Onesimus? Although that would have been perfectly normal within that context, Paul calls on Philemon to treat Onesimus not simply as a brother, but as he would the Apostle himself, as a fellow-worker in the gospel (v. 17).

Paul's points in Philemon fit very well with Yoder's contention that, because the Powers are conquered by Christ and because they are our servants (not vice versa), we are free to do otherwise than our current Power configuration might lead us to believe. In other words, Paul wants Philemon to recognize that the master-slave relationship does not have an eternal, Platonic essence that must be lived up to by each party. Philemon is free

¹⁵¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 178.

to recognize that his most basic relationship to Onesimus is as his brother in Christ, just as Paul sets aside his apostolic authority in order to relate to Onesimus in the most basic way, as his brother in Christ.

Despite these points, some might still see Yoder as legitimizing an oppressive status quo. Yoder's ultimate concern must be clarified: perverted power breeds perverted power. Said colloquially, the key to overturning the oppression of the Powers is not to fight fire with fire. Because Yoder worries about the power of *ressentiment* to define how we think about liberation from patriarchy or oppression, he is both sympathetic to and cautious about certain forms of feminist and liberation theology.¹⁵² If feminism is merely a call to let women participate in the same domineering practices created by a largely patriarchal society, it is not really revolutionary. For example, that Margaret Thatcher can be the prime minister may say less about the power of feminism and more about how power politics can inscribe women as well as men into its system.¹⁵³ If the role of pastor or priest is conceived in terms of "lording it over," then allowing women to abuse authority in the same way that men do is hardly a sign of true freedom. If liberation theology affirms that oppressed peoples have the same right as superpowers to be violent and bear arms in a just cause, then it still partakes of the Eurocentric model of missionary colonialism that it purportedly rejects.¹⁵⁴ Yoder therefore calls for a change that gets beyond seeing the oppressed and oppressor as locked and defined by the *oppressive* flow

¹⁵² On *ressentiment*, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swenson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 19-21.

¹⁵³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 60.

¹⁵⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 200.

of power.¹⁵⁵ Instead, revolutionary subordination taps into the power of creation and the politics of Jesus to re-open the floodgates of charity, which enables us to see a whole new world, a world turned topsy-turvy by the way we are set free to bear witness to Christ's rule, a witness so revolutionary that it generally takes the mundane shape of leaven slowly taking over the flour bin.¹⁵⁶ For Yoder, oppression is to be feared less than the oppressed having their desires shaped in conformity with their oppressors.¹⁵⁷ Although perverted power breeds perverted power, the *Haustafeln* calls Christians to receive the gift of true power and then pass it on so that Christian relationships might be mutually empowering rather than selfishly oppressive.

Conclusion

For Yoder's theology of culture, human beings are created to exercise Christ-like power and the Powers are created to be dynamic servants that enable peace and flourishing. The fall distorts both humanity and the Powers. Humans become slaves to their desire for anti-Christ-like power and the Powers become false gods that enslave humans rather than enable them to truly love God and neighbor. The politics of Jesus *is* the power of creation, embodied not in a pristine Garden, but in the desert of the "real" world. In the midst of this fallen world, the power of creation reappears as the power of

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Daniel Barber, "The Particularity of Jesus and the Time of the Kingdom: Philosophy and Theology in Yoder," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 1 (2007): 71.

¹⁵⁶ Yoder cites this image from Matt. 13:33 in "Discerning the Kingdom of God in the World," in *For the Nations*, 244.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 19.15: "It is a happier lot to be the slave of a man than of a lust: indeed, the lust for mastery, to say nothing of any other, is itself the harshest kind of mastery, which lays waste the hearts of mortal men." See also 15. 7.

cross and resurrection, which unmask the Powers as pretenders to the throne. The real world is not in fact the world of violence and the sword but the world ruled by the slain and resurrected Lamb.

True transformation of culture therefore rejects perverted ways of exercising power in God's creation and calls us be conformed to the image of Christ and his cross, the power and wisdom of God. In redemption, we are released from idolatrous human power and freed to exercise true, Christ-like power, which is both empowering and powerful precisely because it moves with the grain of the universe. This means neither wholesale acceptance nor wholesale rejection of particular Powers or cultural practices, but constant and discerning engagement. Thus, Yoder's doctrine of creation is rooted in the Word by whom all things were created and his theology of culture takes its cues from the Lord who reigns over every culture.

Does this Lord rule over the state as well? If so, how? Does Yoder speak so negatively of the state that he sets aside at least one part of God's creation as inherently unredeemable? Despite Yoder's affirmation of creation, does this amount to an evil that goes so deep it overtakes the goodness of creation and withstands the power of redemption? Yoder's view of the state must be examined in light of his view of the Powers.

CHAPTER 6: “FROM THE BEGINNING IT WAS NOT SO”: THE SWORD-BEARING STATE

Introduction

To some, Yoder’s denial that the state is rooted in creation is evidence that he has a deficient doctrine of creation, which in turn reveals problematic views of redemption and the Trinity.¹ If the state is evil but is part of the orders of creation, then Yoder’s doctrine of creation seemingly conflates creation and fall. If the state is creational but is not redeemed, then Yoder appears to concede some realm of creation to sin and the fall, thus limiting the scope of Christ’s redemptive activity. In either case, the apparent disjunction between creation and redemption raises questions with respect to politics and the state: Does Yoder depreciate the work of the Father in creation? Does he gnosticize the work of the Son in redemption by relegating some spheres of creation and culture to the trash heap of history, whose *finis* will be termination rather than fulfillment? If I am going to argue that creation and redemption cohere in Yoder’s Trinitarian theology of culture, these questions must be addressed. I do not attempt here to address everything

¹ J. Budziszewski, “Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought,” in *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices in Evangelical Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 116, 120; Guenther Haas, “The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 108-129; Nigel Goring Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 163-166.

Yoder says about the sword, the state, and war.² My scope is more limited: I argue that Yoder shows that the sword-bearing state is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation. God's providential allowance for the sword must not be confused or conflated with God's creative and redemptive will, nor should it be confused with the disproportionate, Lamech-like violence of war.

Before proceeding, a note regarding the term "state" is in order. Because Yoder speaks as a contemporary author, he most often refers to the political authorities as the state. Sometimes he uses the term "state" as a gloss for political power *per se*, but this is for ease of reference, not because he thinks the modern nation-state is something that has

² Two of Yoder's short books deal directly with the question of the state. Cf. *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964); and *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003; originally published as *Nachfolge Christi also Gestalt politischer Verantwortung*, [Basel: Agape Verlag, 1964]). For Yoder's frequent engagement with just war theory, see "Bluff or Revenge: The Watershed in Democratic Deterrence Awareness," in *Ethics in the Nuclear Age: Strategy, Religious Studies, and the Churches*, ed. Todd Whitmore (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989); "The Challenge of Peace: A Historic Peace Church Perspective," in *Peace in a Nuclear Age: The Bishops' Pastoral Letter in Perspective*, ed. Charles J. Reid, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986); "A Consistent Alternative View within the Just War Family," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1985): 112-120; "The Credibility of Ecclesiastical Teaching on the Morality of War," in *Celebrating Peace*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); "How Many Ways are There to Think Morally about War?" *Journal of Law & Religion* 11, no. 1 (1994): 83-107; "Just War Tradition: Is it Credible?" *Christian Century* (Mar. 13, 1991): 295-298; "Karl Barth and the Problem of War," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2002); "Military Realities and Teaching the Laws of War," in *Theology, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); "Nuclear Arms in Christian Pacifist Perspective," in *War No More? Options in Nuclear Ethics*, ed. James W. Walters (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); "The Reception of the Just War Tradition by the Magisterial Reformers," *History of European Ideas* 9, no. 1 (1988): 1-23; *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*, Church Peace Mission Pamphlet No. 6 (Washington, D.C.: Church Peace Mission, 1966); "Surrender: A Moral Imperative," *The Review of Politics* 48 (Fall 1986): 576-595; "War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions," in *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); *What Would You Do?* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); and *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996). In addition, while at Notre Dame, Yoder taught courses in Catholic social thought and instructed ROTC students in just war theory. Yoder disavowed the idea that the just war and pacifist traditions were diametrically opposed: "In the face of most real moral choices, whether the ideological 'wars of liberation' or the world-threatening nuclear exchange, the two views, if held with integrity, would have the same impact." Cf. *When War Is Unjust*, 6.

always existed and will always exist in human history. Hence, one must keep in mind the dynamic nature of human power and the dynamic (not static) nature of the Powers. This means that political power can be configured in a host of ways, some good and some bad. It also means that when Yoder refers to the sword-bearing state, as he often does, he is not referring to an unchanging Platonic essence, but a particular way that the flow of power has been configured for the sake of meeting certain needs and reaching certain ends. Therefore, I use the term “sword-bearing state” to indicate when Yoder speaks of the postlapsarian phenomenon that society is organized by the threat of potentially lethal force, recognizing that “the state” is just one historical specimen among many.³ The key question, for Yoder and for us, is whether political power can be otherwise than the appeal to the sword. Yoder’s account begins where we must, with Scripture.

The Biblical Basis for Yoder’s View

For Yoder, any Christian view of the origins of the sword and state must be compatible with Scripture. Yoder finds several texts instructive when discussing the origins of the sword and state, including the narrative of Abel, Cain, and Lamech; God’s words to Noah in Genesis 9; and Romans 13.⁴

³ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12, n. 6.

⁴ What follows draws upon four of Yoder’s essays, “The Voice of Your Brother’s Blood,” in *He Came Preaching Peace: Bible Lectures on Peacemaking* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); “Against the Death Penalty,” in H. Wayne House and Yoder, *The Death Penalty Debate: Two Opposing Views of Capital Punishment* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 119-131; Yoder, “On Generating Alternative Paradigms,” in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WS: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, 1992), 56-62; and “A Theological Critique of Violence,” in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, eds. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 27-41.

Abel, Cain, and Lamech

In the beginning, there was harmony between brother and brother, shepherd and farmer. This harmony was torn asunder when Cain killed his brother Abel, for reasons not explicated in the biblical text. This is not only a particular but a paradigmatic story for human history: brother against brother. Notably, it is not the strange and foreign Other but the similar and familiar Brother who is the first homicide victim.⁵ For Yoder, Cain's response and God's response to this murder are both instructive for understanding retaliation and the sword.

Upon hearing God's declaration of the consequences of his sin—estrangement from the ground and a life of wandering—Cain expresses fear: “Whoever finds me will kill me” (Gen. 4:13). Humans outside the immediate family of Adam first appear in the biblical text not as a source of community, procreation, or affection but as a threat.⁶ Cain knows that the instinctive reaction of humans to a wrong done is to react in kind. Yoder notes that God does not need to instruct humans that this retaliation is called for; it is simply the normal reflex of fallen human beings to exact revenge for wrongs done.⁷ Thus, the first word said about human society at large is that of mimetic violence, a gut reaction to the offense of Cain. For Yoder, this reaction is pre-theoretical: “It will seem self-evident to them that that is what he has asked for by what he did.”⁸ Any moral, legal, political, or cultic explanation arrives only after the sheer facticity of the mimetic

⁵ Yoder, “Generating Alternative Paradigms,” 58.

⁶ Yoder, “Theological Critique of Violence,” in *War of the Lamb*, 28.

⁷ Yoder, “Against the Death Penalty,” 121.

⁸ Yoder, “Theological Critique of Violence,” in *War of the Lamb*, 28.

vengeance exacted against the offender.⁹ The violence of Cain against Abel is thereby mirrored in the violence of other humans against Cain, a violence that is reactive and that leaves no place for Cain's redemption.¹⁰ Crucially, this retaliatory dynamic is the characteristic impulse of the sword-bearing state. The text of Scripture is clear that it originates not in God's prescriptive will but in fallen humanity.¹¹

God's response is quite different from that of sinful humans, for God both brings Cain's sin to light and displays his grace. The first time in the biblical narrative we are confronted with the terrible and irreversible act of murder, God's response is forgiveness and preservation of the murderer, a response that sets the tone for the rest of Scripture.¹² God affirms the sacredness of human life not by demanding the life of the murderer (as fallen humans do) but by preserving it. Guilt is thereby superceded by a grace that enables life to go on, a pattern established already in God's response to Adam and Eve.¹³ Sin and death are the enemies of God's creatures. God's response to sin is not swift retribution but a patient willingness to continue working with his creatures. Moreover, in marking Cain, God shows grace to the wider society ready to kill Cain, inasmuch as he turns the vengeful reflex of society against itself by the threat of sevenfold vengeance. As

⁹ Yoder, "Theological Critique of Violence," in *War of the Lamb*, 29. Cf. "Against the Death Penalty," 156-161.

¹⁰ See John Milbank on reactive ethics versus the ethics of the gift. Cf. Milbank, "Can Morality Be Christian?" in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹¹ One could draw an analogy to Davidic kingship and the Temple in Israel's history. Neither were God's ideas, but God accommodated himself to fallen humans. Notably, both Davidic kingship and the Temple get dropped as Israel's history continues and their meaning radically revamped by Jesus: the true king is the suffering servant and he (and his people) is the place where God dwells.

¹² Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," 121.

¹³ Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 59.

a result of human sin, society is neither God's creational intentions for harmonious humanity nor absolute chaos.¹⁴ It is a society of sinful persons who are held together as much by mutual fear as mutual trust.

In the text of Genesis 4, the retaliatory reflex quickly escalates into disproportionate vengeance, as seen in Lamech's boast: "I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven fold" (Gen 4:23-24). The retaliatory reflex does not stay purely symmetrical but, given human sinfulness, goes beyond the original violation. Since the retaliatory reflex was not based on logical calculation to begin with, it easily transforms into machismo, bloodlust, and destruction for its own sake. Rather than operating within the symmetry of the *lex talionis*, Lamech's boast makes revenge an absolute value. Sinful humans are thus prone to perpetuate and escalate the cycle of violence by seeking "justice" according to self-centered rationality, which, in the end, only incites further escalating responses as recompense for the previous injustice.¹⁵

Noah

The problem of Lamech's boast stands in the background of God's words to Noah about the shedding of human blood. The context of Genesis 9, Yoder notes, is that of ritual sacrifice.¹⁶ Prior to the flood, God had not given permission for humans to eat animals. After the flood, God allows this, with the proviso that humans should not eat the

¹⁴ Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 60.

¹⁵ Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," 122.

¹⁶ Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," 122-123.

blood of the animals. The life is in the blood and therefore represents the sacredness of animal life to God. This sacredness means that there is no such thing as a secular slaughter of animals for food. Every life of an animal taken is a ritual sacrifice. This “sacrificial worldview” is the context for what God says about the taking of human life.

It is in this context that we find Genesis 9:5-6, which states, “Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God he made man.” Yoder makes several observations about this text. He points out that God is not here introducing a new demand that killers be put to death, for that has been humanity’s default impulse toward killers from the beginning. Instead, God is harnessing the retaliatory reflex of fallen humans by placing it within the context of this sacrificial worldview.¹⁷ If the blood of animals is precious to God, how much more is the blood of humans who were made in God’s image.

Given the sacrificial worldview proffered in this text, Yoder rejects three possible interpretations of this text. First, this text is not a moral demand imposed by God to the effect that for every pain inflicted there must be an equal pain inflicted that balances the scales of justice. Second, it is not an educational demand to teach the offender (or other observers) that crime does not pay. Third, it is not prescribing a political order or how to run a city. Instead, this is a fundamentally ritual, religious, and cultic text. Because the killing of a human is not simply an offense against civil society but the immolation of one who is the image of God, Yoder contends that it can only be properly described in

¹⁷ Yoder, “Against the Death Penalty,” 122.

specifically religious and cultic terms: “The killing of a killer is not a civil, nonreligious matter. It is a sacrificial act. The blood—i.e., the life—of every man and beast belongs to God. To respect this divine ownership means, in the case of animals, that the blood of a sacrificed victim is not to be consumed. For humans, it means that there shall be no killing. If there is killing, the offense is a cosmic, ritual, religious evil, demanding ceremonial compensation.”¹⁸ In describing the taking of a killer’s life as ritual sacrifice, Yoder moves beyond both the vengeful violence of Lamech and the purely political description of this act as “capital punishment.” Although it may seem counterintuitive to claim that human sacrifice is a way of affirming the sacredness of life, Yoder’s point is that when this move is made, it restrains the human tendency to exact disproportionate revenge for wrongs done and demonstrates the utter seriousness that accompanies any taking of human life, even that of a killer.

So, as with Cain, God is showing his grace by restraining the tendency to move from retaliation to revenge. Humans are already, from the beginning, responding to killers with the *lex talionis*: “life for life.” God does not need to step in and instruct humans to do this. Rather, he limits the reach of this vengeance by affirming the sacredness of human life and allowing human sacrifice only on the grounds that one has taken the life of another. This puts the brakes on the trajectory established by Lamech, in which human life is discarded with ease and disdain. Even if one were to concede that this text institutes some kind of sword-bearing civil government, Yoder notes that we are no longer in Genesis 1-2 but in Genesis 9. Hence, we are no longer under the rubric of

¹⁸ Yoder, “Against the Death Penalty,” 127.

creation but of fall. God's providential grace continues to restrain human sin, but that is neither his creational intent for human life nor is it redemption. Rather, God's preservation keeps things from falling apart until the coming of the One in whom all things hold together.

Romans 13

Although Yoder addresses Romans 13 in *Politics*, he notes that the Bible's teaching about the state does not stand or fall with this one text.¹⁹ Yoder's chief concern is not to develop a theory of the state based on seven verses (Rom. 13:1-7), but to challenge the claim that "by virtue of the divine institution of government as a part of God's *good creation*, its mandate to wield the sword and the Christian's duty to obey the state combine to place upon the Christian a moral obligation to support and participate in the state's legal killing (death penalty, war), despite contrary duties which otherwise would seem to follow from Jesus' teaching and example."²⁰ It is worth noticing that Yoder is particularly focused on separating *the sword* (not society or order) from creation.

Although Yoder makes many points in this chapter, the most relevant for our purposes is the discussion of the origin of the state. Yoder's third proposition in this chapter states, "The subordination that is called for recognizes whatever power exists, accepts whatever structure of sovereignty happens to prevail. The text does not affirm, as

¹⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 194. His chapter "Let Every Soul Be Subject: Romans 13 and the Authority of the State," deals most fully with this text (193-209). Cf. Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 74-83.

²⁰ Yoder, *Politics*, 194 (emphasis added).

the tradition has it, a divine act of institution or ordination of a particular government.”²¹ Yoder outlines and rejects two traditional interpretations. First, the positivistic view, a more Lutheran view, holds that whatever government exists expresses the revelatory will of God. The main problem with this view is that the text does not support this kind of blanket sanction upon any and all governments. Second, the normative view, popular in the Calvinist tradition, holds that the concept of proper government is introduced, but no particular government is thereby automatically in line with this norm. The problem with this view, for Yoder, is that the text provides no concept of the “proper state” by which we could both accredit and disqualify particular states.²²

Yoder’s rejection of these two positions does not lead to anarchy, as some might suppose, for the text of Romans 13 teaches that God is sovereign: “God is not said to *create* or *institute* or *ordain* the powers that be, but only to *order* them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place.”²³ Yoder contrasts the concept of God “ordering” the sword-bearing state versus “ordaining” it.²⁴ By “ordain,” Yoder means the idea that God creates or institutes either the sword-bearing state as such or a particular state. God gave humanity power in the beginning, and we see certain Powers established already in the garden, including the family and caretaking of the earth. God did not, however, set up the sword-bearing state as a creational institution. Instead, God harnesses a perverted power that fallen humans are already exercising

²¹ Yoder, *Politics*, 198-199.

²² Yoder, *Politics*, 200-201.

²³ Yoder, *Politics*, 201.

²⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 199.

(vengeance) and “orders” or “restrains” this retaliatory reflex to preserve rather than destroy life. This explains why one does not find “moral support or religious approval of the state” in Romans 13, but instead a call “for subordination to whatever powers that be.”²⁵ Consequently, Christians should neither deify the state nor overthrow it in the name of a more perfect union that more closely approximates the “ideal” state.²⁶

Preserving Power: The Place of the Sword-Bearing State

Cain’s Mark: Preservation

Taken together, Yoder’s exegesis and his view of human power and the Powers outlined in the previous chapter provide crucial keys to his view of the sword-bearing state. Yoder’s thought on the sword-bearing state operates from a basic principle of continuity and coherence between creation and redemption. So Yoder states the following with respect to the coming of God’s kingdom:

One of the original axioms in this new arrangement [the kingdom] is that it parallels God’s original intent. This is most striking in Matthew 19 when the Pharisees are discussing whether divorce is permissible. Jesus conceded that there seems to be room made for divorce in Deuteronomy, but he says that was a concession—a concession made for the sake of the hardness of human hearts. “But from the beginning it was not so.” In other words, “*from the beginning*” is the original standard Jesus has now come to restore. One of the things Jesus says about his kingdom, one of the axioms of the new order or relations among people that his kingship establishes, is that things will be as they were meant to be. Things will fulfill the creative intent of God.²⁷

²⁵ Yoder, *Politics*, 201.

²⁶ Although Yoder does not specifically refer to the American Revolution, I use the phrase “a more perfect union” as an example of justifying a revolution in the name of an ideal.

²⁷ Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 246.

Yoder's words on divorce are equally applicable to the sword-bearing state. It is a concession to work with fallen humanity, but represents a temporary forbearance rather than a creational or redemptive norm for human life.

We must be clear that Yoder explicitly states that human society, organization, and order are creational: "An unfallen earthly society would certainly need a civil order to make decisions and to apportion tasks and resources. But it would not need a sword."²⁸ Because the original creation was fully good, there is no proper place for the sword. So Yoder states, "What we do deny is that the order of creation can explain to us why and how the *sword*, i.e., the calculated measuring out of evil, can be necessary."²⁹ Yoder's position is not a unique one in the Christian tradition.³⁰ Yoder's thought certainly allows thinkers to entertain the hypothesis that there could be a kind of sword-less social order in the beginning, operating out of cooperative shalom rather than competitive strife. The problem arises when thinkers see the sword as the essence of social order and politics rather than a postlapsarian addendum.³¹ When the sword is seen as *essential* to social order, Yoder contends, creation and fall have been fused.³²

²⁸ Yoder, "Reformed versus Anabaptist Social Strategies," 5. See also *Christian Witness*, 34

²⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 34. Cf. *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 19.

³⁰ This position is also held by, among others, Augustine, Bonaventure, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and the Belgic Confession. For a good discussion of the relation of sin, the sword, and politics in Reformed thought, see Jeong Kii Min, *Sin and Politics: Issues in Reformed Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

³¹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 82.

³² Yoder, "Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies," 5.

On this point, Yoder is clear that not all aspects of the Powers can be deemed creational. Both the Powers and human power are fallen and have developed historically in institutions and practices that bear the marks of sin. Yoder therefore argues for discernment with respect to different Powers. Two examples that elucidate this point are the family and the state: “What we take to be typical of some realms of creatureliness may be farther from the divine purpose than what we take to be definitional for others. It may be that when we define the state as quintessentially the sword, and define the family as a covenant of permanent monogamy, the latter definition is closer to God’s original purpose for human sociality than the former.”³³ Because the sword (even the sword that limits and restrains evil) ultimately stems from the retaliatory reflex of fallen humanity, it should not be construed as originating in God’s good creation. Instead, it has a very particular, postlapsarian function: to *preserve*.

For Yoder, if we are to make sense of the sword, preservation and providence are categories that we need just as much as creation, fall, and redemption. Even in its fallen state, God’s world is a cosmos, not chaos.³⁴ When God places his protection on Cain and promises vengeance on Cain’s potential killers, his goal is to *preserve* Cain.³⁵ The focus is not on taking human life, but preserving it. The mandate of the state is similar: it ought to have a preserving effect on society. This mandate, however, is tangled up in sin,

³³ Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth*, 165.

³⁴ Yoder, “The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King,” in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 138.

³⁵ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 18.

insofar as it uses “evil means [i.e. the sword] to keep evil from getting out of hand.”³⁶ Even if it preserves, the retaliatory reflex is a response and reaction to sin, so that *sin* rather than creative and redemptive grace determines the way the sword operates. The sword also cannot bring about true *shalom*, so it should not be confused with redemption or consummation. The preservative effect of the sword is thus *relatively* necessary: it is neither necessary nor able to bring about the peace of the kingdom of God, but it is relatively necessary among fallen people to maintain temporal peace. The sword-bearing state is thus not an end in itself but an instrument of postlapsarian societal order for the sake of God’s work of redemption.

Because of this preserving work, Yoder can affirm that the state is an “order of grace.”³⁷ This does not mean that the state can be equated with the church or that it is part of redemption, but simply that God’s grace works to restrain the effects of sin on all humanity, and one way that is done is through political power.³⁸ God’s grace can be operative even in a political situation with a quite tyrannical ruler. For example, the years immediately following Saddam Hussein’s 2003 defeat demonstrated that the chaos produced by a vacuum of power may in fact be worse than the iron hand of a dictator. Importantly, this affirmation of God’s preservation and providence does not amount to condoning either the general appeal to the sword or particular states. It should rather

³⁶ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 18.

³⁷ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12.

³⁸ At this point, Yoder sounds very similar to the Kuyperian doctrine of common grace. Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 83.

produce praise of our providential God whose greatness enables him to make even human sin and wrath serve a relatively positive function for the life of humanity.

Yoder also emphasizes that God's preservation is manifest in what he calls an "order of providence," in which Christ rules over the Powers, including the state, in contrast to the "orders of redemption," in which Christ rules in and through obedient disciples.³⁹ The idea of God's sovereignty or providence can be used rightly or wrongly, according to Yoder. A faulty notion of providence would conclude that, because God is sovereign over every sphere, the Christian can validly participate in every sphere and every particular institution and practice within a particular sphere.⁴⁰ God's sovereignty, Yoder notes, is not a stamp of approval. For example, God in his sovereignty can use Assyria as an instrument to judge Israel, but this does not exempt God from immediately judging Assyria for its own wickedness, expressed precisely in what they were doing to Israel. God thus providentially uses Assyria while simultaneously pronouncing woes upon them (Isa. 10).⁴¹ Likewise, although God can providentially use the evil of Joseph's brothers (Gen. 50:20), "providence" cannot be claimed as justification for selling a sibling into slavery. This same type of logic is employed by Yoder when he affirms both that God is sovereign over the sword-bearing state and that this is a case where the Christian ought to confess faith in God's sovereignty rather than actively participate in

³⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12.

⁴⁰ Yoder, *Discipleship as Christian Responsibility*, 62. Cf. "The Power Equation," in *For the Nations*, 138.

⁴¹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 11. See also *Politics*, 198, 202.

this sphere.⁴² In other words, when Christ cries “mine!” over certain institutions, practices, and Powers, that cry may be a “no trespassing” sign to the Christian rather than a welcome mat.⁴³ Some things are usable by God and not by his people precisely because God is God and we are not.⁴⁴

Because the sword is not rooted in creation, it will not persist into the eschaton. As Yoder notes, redemption is the redemption of creation; fallen manifestations of human power and the Powers will not persist into the fullness of the kingdom. Importantly, for Yoder, the time of the sword-bearing state is limited not because the sword is too powerful, but because it is too weak. This is why Paul states that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty” (2 Cor. 10:4).⁴⁵ The opposite of fallen power is not weakness, but true power. The sword serves a purpose within a fallen world, but it is weak because it is always *reactive*, a response to some prior violation. The only way beyond the sword, to a new beginning and new creation, is through Christ’s cross and resurrection, in which Christians are called to participate. As such, the good news of this

⁴² With respect to sovereignty, Yoder might be accused of “out-Calvinizing” the Calvinists. Cf. Richard J. Mouw and Yoder, “Evangelical Ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (Spring 1991): 131. On sovereignty, see also Yoder, *Preface*, 246.

⁴³ I refer here to Abraham Kuyper’s well-known statement that “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry ‘Mine!’” (Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488. Both H. Evan Runner and Richard Mouw point out that the option before the Christian is not *either withdrawal or engagement*, but *both withdrawal and engagement*. (Runner, *Scriptural Religion and Political Task* [Toronto: Wedge, 1974], and Mouw, “Providence and Politics,” in *Life is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner*, ed. Henry Vander Goot [St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1981], 218).

⁴⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, 198.

⁴⁵ Yoder, “The Lordship of Christ and the Power Struggle,” in *The Lordship of Christ: Proceedings of the Seventh Mennonite World Conference*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963).

gospel is “not about delegitimizing violence so much as about overcoming it.”⁴⁶ The cross and resurrection are more powerful than the sword because they do not allow sin and injustice the final word. Instead, they offer hope for both the offender and offended that reconciliation and a new creation is possible. In the cross and resurrection, the One who through the Word spoke creation into being *ex nihilo* speaks again into the void of human sin, evil, and violence, creating the possibility of a life rooted not in reaction but in creation.

Because the sword-bearing state is neither rooted in creation nor part of redemption, Yoder denies the need to define the ideal sword-bearing state “as such.”⁴⁷ For Yoder, just as wider society’s response to Cain was not first based on theory but on mimetic reflex, so the sword-bearing state does not exist first and foremost *because of* theoretical justification (although that can be given after the fact), but because of the force behind it.⁴⁸ Yoder concludes that no sword-bearing state is ever really “proper” in the sense that it is creationally-rooted.⁴⁹

Interestingly, Yoder and Reinhold Niebuhr converge here. Niebuhr describes well how fallen politics work. He and Yoder would agree that *if* justice is defined as primarily retributive justice and the attempt to balance conflicting, selfish interests, then all that can ever be done is a kind of approximation to the ideal, which can never be reached.

Whereas Niebuhr accepts this as the nature of things, Yoder sees this as the *fallen* nature

⁴⁶ Yoder, “Theological Critique of Violence,” in *War of the Lamb*, 41.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 77.

⁴⁸ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12.

⁴⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 32.

of things. In the midst of this organized chaos, Yoder argues that what is really needed is not more theory about the ideal state, but increased attention to the practices of one's particular state so the state can be called to use its power in accordance with the politics of Jesus and the power of creation, one concrete practice at a time.⁵⁰ Moreover, this call is *not* a call to an "impossible possibility," but to a real, viable option. This is precisely because there is no such thing as an ideal sword-bearing state, only servant power or *libido dominandi*.

Lamech's Boast: War

Although the sword-bearing state is not rooted in creation, Yoder sees a qualitative difference between the sword that limits itself to the function of Cain's mark and the sword that degenerates into Lamech's boast. For him, neither the internally-focused police function of the state nor the externally-focused war-waging of the state can be creational.⁵¹ Though the *lex talionis* has been superceded for the Christian, it still represents God's harnessing of the retaliatory reflex, whereas war does not. War is Lamech's boast writ large.

In *Politics*, Yoder argues that the function of police and acts of war must be distinguished: this "is not simply a matter of degree to which the appeal to force goes, the

⁵⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff makes a similar point: "We must ask what *this* institution in *this* institutional array ought to be doing, or what redistributions of function ought to occur in *this* array. We must not ask what *the* State should be doing, as if what are recognizably states should in all times and all places have the same assignment of functions. We do not owe it to God to realize the inner nature of the State; rather, we owe it to God that our own institutional array, including our state, serves humanity." Cf. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 63.

⁵¹ On the issue of Yoder and police force, see Andy Alexis-Baker, "Unbinding Yoder from Just Policing," in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, eds. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony S. Siegrist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 147-166.

number of persons killed or killing. It is a structural and profound difference in the sociological meaning of the appeal to force.”⁵² Police force is different from war in the following ways:⁵³

1. The violence or threat thereof is applied only to the offending party.
2. The use of violence by the agent of the police is subject to review by higher authorities.
3. The police officer applies power within the limits of a state whose legislation even the criminal knows to be applicable to him.
4. There are serious safeguards to keep the violence of the police from being applied in a wholesale way against the innocent.
5. The police power generally is great enough to overwhelm that of the individual offender so that any resistance on the offender’s part is pointless.

In its limited and retributive nature, police force thus bears similarities to the retaliatory reflex that Cain feared. Given humanity’s fallenness, that reflex quickly jumps to war without bounds.

When Lamech takes what God meant as a preservative and uses it as an authorization to destroy life on the basis of an insult, we have the paradigm of the sword-bearing state gone awry. For Yoder, the fall of humanity means that this will be the rule, not the exception, for the sword-bearing state. So Yoder contends, “There is no ground in the biblical doctrine of the fall to argue that the hand that bears the sword or the order that defends itself by the sword is any less fallen than the offender against whom the sword is used.”⁵⁴ Hence, the problem throughout human history is not too little application of the sword, but too much: “What is destroying nature and destroying the possibility of social

⁵² Yoder, *Politics*, 204.

⁵³ The following is quoted verbatim from Yoder, *Politics*, 204.

⁵⁴ Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 5.

peace is not anarchy, but government gone beyond bounds. What is killing us is not savagery, but civilization...When we fight a war to end war, or to make the world safe for democracy, when we destroy Vietnam to save it, when we say the Marines in Lebanon or the missiles in Wyoming are 'keeping the peace,' it is obvious that what is explained as a corrective or defensive measure has become itself the problem."⁵⁵

A prime example of Lamech's boast, for Yoder, is nuclear deterrence. The accumulation and threat of nuclear weapons is inconsistent with just war theory, Yoder argues, and therefore reveals itself to partake of the wildly disproportionate bloodlust of Lamech. In conversation with just war theorists, Yoder notes both similarities and dissimilarities with previous notions of deterrence.⁵⁶ Although it is true that some element of threat has always existed in the posturing of different nations toward one another, the nuclear threat is qualitatively different insofar as its actual execution would clearly violate certain standards of the just war theory, including discrimination, proportionality, and noncombatant immunity.⁵⁷ The possession of a nuclear arsenal must therefore be for purposes either of bluff or revenge. Yoder's central point is that, in both cases, nuclear weapons reveal that Lamech's boast has not gone away but has only intensified.

On the one hand, Yoder notes the peculiar moral stance of the supposed "bluff" in which a nation develops and institutionalizes nuclear weapons and the processes and

⁵⁵ Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 60, 62.

⁵⁶ See footnote 2 above for some of Yoder's works on just war theory.

⁵⁷ Yoder, "Bluff or Revenge," 80. Yoder elsewhere outlines the criteria of the just war tradition. Cf. Yoder, *When War is Unjust*, 147-161.

procedures for their deployment. He notes that just war theory has not yet developed a notion of intentionality that can explain how the objectively immoral ends of these weapons can be made to fit within a subjective intention for good. More generically stated, the problem is that neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic ethical theory has yet explained how a person or state can do an evil deed for the sake of good.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the readiness to carry out the threat after it has failed to deter another state does not fit well within the just war framework, for several reasons:⁵⁹

1. Carrying out the threat after it has failed to deter can no longer be justified as deterring. Now it must be thought of as retaliation. Yet this can no longer be justified by any of the reasons whereby just-war thinking in the past has made the case for reprisal.
2. It can be revenge; yet revenge is not morally justified in any framework except that of a theocratic holy war, and then on the grounds of special revelation. It has no place in modern Western just-war thinking, and no consequentially justifiable social effect.
3. Going through with the counterattack can be intended to prove that the bluff was no bluff, but that proof no longer has the function which was supposed to justify it in the first place. The additional destruction is henceforth gratuitous.
4. It cannot be justified on any consequential grounds that begin by taking stock of the shape of the universe after having undergone the massive first attack which the threat failed to deter. The counterattack will not bring the victim of the massive first strike closer to anything that could be called "winning." It will bring the world, including one's own civilization, closer to destruction either through permanent nuclear winter or through radiation diseases, even where the bombs themselves did not destroy.

For Yoder, when we carefully apply the tools of just war theory itself to the logic of nuclear deterrence, we see that the forces at play are most often not rational, but tend

⁵⁸ Yoder, "Bluff or Revenge," 83.

⁵⁹ The following is quoted verbatim from Yoder, "Bluff or Revenge," 80-81.

toward the machismo, bloodlust, and revenge of Lamech.⁶⁰ In this way, war continues to bear the mark of the boast. Although the potential consequences of nuclear deployment are new in human history, what it reveals about warfare is not: in the hands of fallen humanity, the sword destroys what it is supposed to preserve, namely, life and peace.

The Christian Witness to the State

Because of his view of the sword-bearing state, it is sometimes thought that Yoder does not allow for (1) Christians speaking to either non-Christians or Christians who do not hold Yoder's view of the sword-bearing state, and (2) Christians contributing to the common good. Close examination of Yoder reveals otherwise. In outlining Yoder's view, we must be clear that, for Yoder, there is no final word on this topic, precisely because the shape of actually existing states is always shifting: "There can be no one timeless right way to relate church and state – or for that matter church and university, church and banking, church and the arts – for that other member of the comparison – the state, the economy – has no one firm meaning... So let us set aside definitions in the abstract, essences, and the idea of the state as such, and look at particular communities, regimes, rulers, in light of the concrete content of the kingdom."⁶¹ Yoder is thus not concerned with finding an abstract type (e.g., against, above, or transforming culture) but with

⁶⁰ Yoder notes that the first Gulf War can be explained more readily with reference to the needs of several actors, including Saddam Hussein and George H. W. Bush, as well as their respective countries, to appear "manly." Accounts of what was happening in the White House, Pentagon, and Baghdad agree that "only a small part of the decision process was the rationally quantified weighing of competing risks and values or of legal obligations and prohibitions. That is true of Saddam Hussein, who is crazy; it is no less true of George Bush or of Norman Schwarzkopf, who are shrewd and sane." Cf. "A Theological Critique of Violence," in *War of the Lamb*, 30.

⁶¹ Yoder, "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 234.

articulating the criteria called for by God's kingdom and seeing how Christians might bring that to bear on their particular situations, with all the historical and cultural embeddedness that implies.

Speaking to Caesar: Rules of Engagement

What is the basis for Christians speaking to non-Christians in positions of governmental authority? Yoder argues that because there is no ideal state, political rulers are not bound to "necessarily" do anything that goes against the grain of the universe. Yoder notes that some Christians, including some Anabaptists and Reinhold Niebuhr, have held that what it means to be a Caesar or political leader of any kind is implanted in the "nature" of things, and that it is contrary to the Gospel.⁶² Yoder rejects this notion. There is no "nature" contradictory to Jesus; there is only the cosmos created by the Word. Also, there are not two kingdoms or two norms: "What holds down the performance and the standards that apply in the world is the weight of sin, not a divinely revealed lower order for secular society."⁶³ The sovereignty of Christ over every sphere means that no sphere can command one to do something contradictory to Christ. So, rather than say that it is impossible for Caesar to follow Christ, Yoder questions the underlying logic.

What makes Caesar act contrary to Christ is not "nature" or his office, but his sin and the fallenness of the Powers, which have been disarmed by Christ. Constantine can become a Christian. That does not baptize and sanction the office of Emperor but should radically reconfigure how the man Constantine exercises power. Thus, for Yoder, Caesar

⁶² Yoder, "Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 146.

⁶³ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 72.

is as free as anyone else to take the risk of faith: “We will not give in to the view that human autonomy is given up when a person becomes part of the state machinery. We will address government officials just as we do other citizens, not treating them as mere cogs in a machine, but rather as persons who are free to oppose the machine’s gears when a responsible decision requires them to do so.”⁶⁴ Here a question arises: how can the confessionally-based language of Christians communicate with a world that does not confess Christ as Lord?

This possibility of communication is based upon the Christian missionary’s seeking the “interworld transformational grammar” that can make sense to the audience.⁶⁵ In his early work, Yoder referred to this language as “middle axioms”: “These concepts will translate into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue. They mediate between the general principles of Christological ethics and the concrete problems of political application. They claim no metaphysical status, but serve usefully as rules of thumb to make meaningful the impact of Christian social thought.”⁶⁶ Yoder later disavows any special attachment to the term “middle axioms” and clarifies that “what matters is to face the challenge of stating good news in pertinent form,” which means that “the moral call must be local, occasional,

⁶⁴ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 45. Cf. “Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 146. Of course, it is not only the political leader, but other persons and professions who must take this risk. For an example of Yoder’s extended engagement with what it means to be a lawyer, see Thomas L. Shaffer, *Moral Memoranda from John Howard Yoder: Conversations on Law, Ethics and the Church between a Mennonite Theologian and a Hoosier Lawyer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

⁶⁵ Yoder, “‘But We Do See Jesus’: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 56.

⁶⁶ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 32-33.

rendered comprehensible and credible by the presence of God's people within the problem setting to which they speak."⁶⁷ Yoder gives examples, such as asking an officer in the Korean War to treat prisoners of war according to the principles of the Geneva Convention or challenging a French intelligence officer in Algeria not to torture innocent suspects.⁶⁸ The call issued to these individuals is based on the ultimate norm of God's love in Christ, but is perfectly comprehensible because it is aimed at the hearer's specific situation.⁶⁹

Admittedly, this call to take a leap of faith might look like personal or professional suicide to the political leader.⁷⁰ Yoder argues that following Christ in concrete ways might get political leaders in trouble, but he astutely observes that politics is generally risky business: "It might happen that the result would be that his [Caesar's] enemies would triumph over him, but that often happens to rulers anyway. It might happen that he would have to suffer, or not stay in office all his life, but that too often happens to rulers anyway, and it is something that Christians are supposed to be ready for. It might happen that he would be killed: but most Caesars are killed anyway. It might happen that some of his followers would have to suffer. But emperors and kings are

⁶⁷ Yoder, "Creation and Gospel," *Persepctives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3, no. 8 (1988): 9.

⁶⁸ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 25. Mark Thiessen Nation notes that Yoder was involved in Algeria from 1954-1957, overseeing the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities relief program that had begun in 1954 as a response to an earthquake that year. Cf. *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 19.

⁶⁹ Yoder lists liberty, equality, fraternity, education, democracy, and human rights as being particularly important in the western world (*Christian Witness*, 73).

⁷⁰ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 73.

accustomed to asking people to suffer for them.”⁷¹ If political leaders were to take the gospel seriously, Yoder argues, we would not be surprised to see justice being done, enemies being loved, creative social alternatives being sought, and problems being solved.⁷² There is no inherent “impossibility” that these things could in fact take place in particular times and places.

Precisely because the Christian and the Church are *not* committed ahead of time to one particular theoretical version of the state “as such,” they can more readily and easily speak to all actually existing states.⁷³ Yoder does not demand some kind of theoretical common ground regarding political theory from which to begin. Instead, he argues that the missionary Church goes to the ground of the receptor culture, learns the political language of that time and place, and uses that language in conversation with political rulers and representatives to address problems on a case-by-case basis, one step at a time.⁷⁴ This position refuses to either deify or demonize any existing state or political configuration, but instead focuses on the ways in which specific problems, some large and some small, can be addressed. Simply speaking to those within political structures, however, is only one component of the Church’s relationship to the powers that be.

⁷¹ Yoder, “Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 146.

⁷² Yoder, “Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 146.

⁷³ Yoder, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 158.

⁷⁴ Yoder spells this out fully in “Christian Case for Democracy,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 151-171.

The Common Good: Conscientious Participation

Throughout his corpus, Yoder persistently denies Reinhold Niebuhr's presumption that to be a faithful Christian entails a refusal to contribute to the common good. Moreover, in the last decade of his life, Yoder's language reveals increasing concern that Stanley Hauerwas risked valorizing Niebuhr's faithfulness-effectiveness dichotomy, seen most clearly in Yoder's titling a book *For the Nations*, a clear and direct rejoinder to Hauerwas' *Against the Nations*.⁷⁵ For Yoder, when the church worships the one true God, it is able to recognize the reality of the common good. When used uncritically, the term "common good" too often refers to the particular good of a particular people, and the good is conceived as a finite quantity, turning human sociality into a zero-sum competition.⁷⁶ By contrast, the church's particularity is for the sake of seeking the peace of the city in which it finds itself.⁷⁷ Hence, for Yoder, faithfulness to the gospel and effective contribution to the common good are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin.

⁷⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). Yoder's *For the Nations*, subtitled *Essays Public and Evangelical* was published in 1997. The essays therein were not new essays, but Yoder's intentional compilation of these essays together and naming of this collection is significant.

⁷⁶ On this mistaken notion, see Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15.5. On the many similarities between the political thought of Augustine and Yoder, see Gerald W. Schlabach, "The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as an Augustinian Interlocutor," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 221-244.

⁷⁷ Yoder frequently references Jeremiah's injunction to the Babylonian exiles to "seek the peace of the city" (Jer. 29:7). For Yoder's succinct summary of this theme, cf. "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *For the Nations*, 51-78.

So, when addressing the question of whether and how Christians can participate in present governmental and societal structures, Yoder refuses the question when framed legalistically: “Is this or that action forbidden for the Christian?”⁷⁸ Instead, the real question is this: Where is the greatest opportunity for me to serve? In what vocations and positions will I have the greatest freedom for such service?⁷⁹ Yoder states this point very clearly in conversation via memoranda with his Notre Dame colleague Thomas Shaffer: “It is epistemologically backward to put the question thus: ‘The state is defined as xxx; can a Christian have to do with it?’ Proper epistemology would say: ‘The Kingdom of God is like...; what does that tell me to share with my neighbor, who has not joined me in following Jesus, but whose human dignity I am pledged to affirm, in our common life.’ [sic] Often there will be things to do that are of higher priority for the disciple to do than running the jails; but if so the reason for that is the stewardship of creativity, not a legalism which writes off certain territories.”⁸⁰

In other words, the shape of the Christian’s obedience is not simply adherence to “thou shalt not’s”; it is the freedom in Christ to fully and truly serve other humans. Christians should be reticent to seek power in civil government, according to Yoder, not out of some concern to stay untainted from the world but because there are more productive ways of serving the common good by pioneering culture in a host of ways that

⁷⁸ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 45. Cf. *Christian Witness*, 56.

⁷⁹ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 45.

⁸⁰ Yoder, in Thomas L. Shaffer, *Moral Memoranda*, 108.

do not depend on the approval or structure of the present state.⁸¹ Thus, in order to avoid the audacity of hope morphing into Niebuhrian “realism,” Yoder would counsel the hopeful kingdom citizen that the structures of the sword-bearing state are often least effective in producing the real and lasting change we need. The Christian should know that there are more possibilities for human life and power than the governing authorities can see. This is why “realism is not reality but an ism. Realism is the opiate of the elites.”⁸²

Although Yoder rules out the Christian wielding the sword on Christological grounds, he points out that the modern state has many more functions than bearing the sword: it builds roads, leads schools, provides medical services, cares for the elderly, delivers the mail, has forestry departments, and makes laws.⁸³ Because these general functions are qualitatively different from wielding the sword, Yoder sees nothing inherently problematic in them, although Christians should together continually engage

⁸¹ Cf. Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 69. See also Yoder’s illustration in *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 45. Elsewhere, Yoder states, “The real option, whether in democracy or elsewhere, is not whether to *accept* power, but whether to *seek* it. To enter in this struggle and to win it normally will pose other challenges far more grave than are involved in the office-holder’s share of responsibility for the police.” *Christian Witness*, 57, n. 9 (emphasis original).

⁸² Yoder, “Creation and Gospel,” 9.

⁸³ For this list, see Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 19, 40; and *Christian Witness*, 56. Yoder also clarifies that even for the early Anabaptists, renouncing the sword did not mean withdrawal from public life. Cf. “The Forms of a Possible Obedience,” in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 128.

and discern their approach to these functions, since they may get pulled into the vortex of a sword-bearing state that escalates from Cain's mark to Lamech's boast.⁸⁴

There is thus always the possibility of the state becoming a master rather than a servant of the common good. Because this possibility always exists, Christians need to exercise constant discernment. The need for discernment never stops because the flow of power never ceases, and we cannot say ahead of time where it is going to go. Rather than calling for consistency to a typological relationship between Christ and culture or the Church and state, Yoder calls for something else: "The consistency which counts is the concrete community process of discernment, as that community converses, in the light of the confession 'Christ is Lord,' about particular hard choices."⁸⁵ Christians are called to inhabit institutions and vocations in a way that bends the power given therein to flow with "the arc from creation to apocalypse," created in and through Christ.⁸⁶ Whereas the fall threatens to undo the very fabric of creation, redemption entails being incorporated into Christ, the thread that weaves and holds all things together.

Conclusion

For Yoder, social order and true power are creational. But the sword, and especially the violence of war that is exercised by the sword-bearing state, is rooted in neither creation nor redemption. Because there is no ideal sword-bearing "state as such,"

⁸⁴ For example, Yoder notes that the school system can get turned into a "propaganda machine" rather than truly serving the people it is meant to serve. Cf. *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 41.

⁸⁵ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 74.

⁸⁶ Yoder, "That Household We Are," (unpublished address, Believers Church Conference on "Is There a Believers' Church Christology?" Bluffton, OH, Oct. 23-25, 1980), 7.

the question of whether the sword-bearing state will persist into the eschaton needs to be reconceptualized. The sword-bearing state was not there in the beginning. Jesus rejects sword-bearing as part of his kingship, as part of what it means to be the *imago Dei*, and as part of his followers' participation in his kingly rule. But to say what particular practices are rejected leaves much to be desired.

Therefore we must ask, is Yoder primarily negative, outlining what he rejects, namely, the sword-bearing state? He connects Christ and creation, but does this merely underscore the necessity of nonviolence and suffering love, which are good ideas but quite abstract? Does Yoder give us clear and concrete ideas about the shape of redeemed and renewed culture? Moreover, if it is claimed that he provides a Trinitarian theology of culture, where does the Holy Spirit fit in? If the Spirit empowers us to follow Jesus, what exactly does this following entail? We have seen his emphasis on the power of creation and the politics of Jesus but not how those emphases come to fruition in his pneumatology. Thus, Yoder's doctrine of the Spirit must be explored to fully grasp his Trinitarian theology of culture.

CHAPTER 7: THE SPIRIT PIONEERING CULTURE

Because Yoder criticizes certain ways that Christians have construed the church's relationship with the sword-bearing state, including the willingness to participate in wielding the sword, he is often charged with being "against culture" or pitting nature against grace.¹ When Yoder rejects the sword, however, his concern is to disavow fallen culture, not culture as God intends it. In fact, Yoder wants to make clear that he is not against but *for* the nations.² To that end, in the last decade of his life, Yoder more intentionally connected his account of the social processes of the Christian community with his sacramentology and pneumatology, and showed how all of the above have direct relevance to a theology of culture. Indeed, the subtitle of his essay "Sacrament as Social Process" is "Christ the Transformer of Culture," emphasizing that the sacraments are a

¹ For example, see J. Daryl Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," *First Things* 168 (Dec. 2006): 33-38; and Guenther Haas, "The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 108-129. Some of Yoder's own proponents risk furthering the conception that he is primarily "against" culture. For example, nearly twenty years ago, Stanley Hauerwas published *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), a title that conveys a primarily antagonistic stance. Craig Carter's more recent book, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), constructs an alternative to Niebuhr's typology that makes violence the central and definitive issue. Both authors inadvertently contribute to the Niebuhrian lens that would read Yoder as primarily defined by what he is against rather than as providing a positive alternative.

² This was the title of Yoder's last book of collected essays before he died. The title is, of course, a rejoinder to Hauerwas' *Against the Nations*. Although some presume that Hauerwas and Yoder are synonymous on all important issues, Yoder's own attempt to differentiate and distance himself from both the content and tone of Hauerwas' work is important.

key facet of his alternative to H. Richard Niebuhr's account of how Christ transforms culture.³

In this chapter, I argue that Yoder views the transformation of culture as dependent on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking of God's kingdom. As a result, Yoder is neither sectarian nor supernaturalist in his view of God's redemption of culture. By saying that Yoder is not "supernaturalist," I mean that, for him, grace restores nature. The work of the Spirit has to do with renewing all aspects of life, including the cultural. Redemption is not the addition of a new supernatural realm to the life of humanity, but a restoration of the ability to carry out the mundane tasks of life and culture in conformity with God's desires for human flourishing. Thus, redemption is not supernaturalist, Gnostic, or escapist. Rather, grace perfects nature, in the sense that the Spirit orients culture toward its proper end, the fullness of God's kingdom. As the "already" of God's kingdom commences in the here and now, we see evidence of that kingdom especially in the church's life together. This is not sectarian, however, because the church's life together is public, carried on in the midst of and for the sake of the nations, who can see and be transformed by the practices pioneered by the church in the power of the Spirit. When the power of creation and the politics of Jesus are unleashed by

³ Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 359-373. Yoder expands this article into *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992). He also addresses the sacraments in "Firstfruits: The Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People," and "The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). He focuses on one of the practices in "Binding and Loosing," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

the person of the Spirit, the public practices of the church cannot help but overflow and exert a transformative effect not only in the church but in all of human culture.

The Church as Sacrament of the Kingdom

To properly understand Yoder's view of the redemption of culture, we must examine three facets of his thought as they pertain to his theology of culture: eschatology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. For Yoder, the life of the Christian community is itself inherently cultural, not merely a narrowly-conceived "religious" life. Thus, the church is, for Yoder, a sacrament of the kingdom inasmuch as it is a sign and seal of God's ultimate intentions for human life, making present in part the fullness of the future. The specific sacraments are likewise cultural practices that point to the eschatological fullness of the kingdom. Although Yoder does not use the exact language of "church as sacrament of the kingdom," close examination reveals that this is precisely his line of thought. Moreover, Yoder's position clarifies how the church, kingdom, and sacraments are directly relevant to a theology of culture.⁴

⁴ It also holds ecumenical promise. On his notion of the sacraments as a way beyond traditional Protestant and Roman Catholic divisions, see Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," in *Royal Priesthood*, 372. The idea of the church as a sacrament of the kingdom has been promoted by, among others, the International Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue, "The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God," (2007), no. 231, http://www.pro.urbe.it/dia-int/r-rc/doc/e_r-rc_3-6.html#5. Accessed Jan. 31, 2009.

Eschatology

Yoder's eschatology begins by affirming the "already" aspect of the kingdom.⁵ The central proclamation of the church is that Jesus is Lord. Drawing on Psalm 110, Yoder focuses on Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and his pouring out of the Spirit as the turning point in human history. The present time of history is thus characterized by the co-existence of two overlapping ages, the old and the new. For Yoder, the essential difference between the old and new *aeons* is not temporal, but directional: the new age is aimed toward the kingdom of God whereas the other is guided by its refusal of Christ's lordship. By virtue of Christ's work and the advent of the Spirit, the presence of the future kingdom is already here. The kingdom is present insofar as God's will is done and, when humanity conforms to that will, the well-being of all humans is promoted. Yoder notes that the reality of this kingdom is grounded not in human potential but divine grace: "The seal of the possibility of His will's being done is the presence of the Holy Spirit, given to the church as a foretaste of the eventual consummation of God's kingdom."⁶ The church is therefore the beachhead where God, by his Spirit, has established his kingdom. Yoder draws on Oscar Cullman's well-known analogy of D-Day and V-Day, contending that the New Testament both proclaims Christ's lordship but also recognizes that evil forces resist God's kingdom coming.⁷ At

⁵ The following is a summary of Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 8-10. Cf. also Craig Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 145-150.

⁶ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 9.

⁷ See Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd F. Wilson (Philadelphia; Westminster, 1950), 84.

the culmination of all things, the Son will hand all things over to the Father, and God will be all in all. Even if this is not fully realized in the present, we are still able to proclaim that God's new reign has broken into the midst of the old age, with all that it entails for human culture.

Pneumatology

In his essay "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men," Yoder charts the connection between the Spirit and the kingdom.⁸ He first points beyond a dualism that locates the Spirit in a sacred realm and politics in a secular one. For Yoder, politics is "anything to do with how people live together in organized ways."⁹ Yoder therefore deconstructs the binary opposition of Spirit and politics, pointing out that, in Scripture, the real duality is between faithfulness and rebellion; true and false politics; true and false spirits. Drawing on the Servant Songs of Isaiah, Yoder notes that the Spirit's empowerment of God's servant has to do with bringing justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1) and being a light to the nations in doing so (Isa. 49:6). When God calls his servant to a life of trust and obedience, those are eminently political virtues, and alternatives to Israel's tendency to trust in military alliances, horses, and chariots.

This same Spirit empowers Jesus when he takes up Isaiah 61 as his platform for ministry. This message, Yoder notes, is inherently social, political, and cultural. The

⁸ Yoder, "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 221-236. The following section is a summary of that essay. This essay was first presented in 1979 and Yoder notes, "Out of respect for the historical datedness of the text, the generic language of the assigned and published title has not been changed, but the term 'men' is sometimes put in quotes to signal that I recognize that datedness." Yoder, "Spirit of God and Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 221, n. 1.

⁹ Yoder, "Spirit of God and Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 223.

oppressed are set free, the hungry receive food, the mighty are humbled, and God's shalom is proclaimed on earth. What Jesus and his followers refer to as the kingdom, Yoder notes, is "the shape of the working of the Spirit of God in the politics of men and women."¹⁰ The Spirit thus empowers followers of Jesus to live in the new order of the kingdom as they serve and patiently wait for God to bring justice to the nations.

Although Yoder does not draw upon the promise of the Spirit in the Old Testament, this only serves to underscore his point that the Spirit is relevant to questions of culture and politics. In Ezekiel 11:19-20, the prophet declares, "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and do them. Then they will be my people and I will be their God." The statutes and ordinances referenced here are not merely cultic but also cultural. Unlike those who would disregard or downplay the importance of law, Yoder notes that Jesus' agenda is as broad as Torah,¹¹ and that we can extend this agenda by honoring the Spirit's work, not to abolish the central commands of Torah, but to write them on the hearts of God's people (Jer. 31:33) in such a way that Torah no longer divides but unites Jew and Gentile. This emphasis, however, does not lead to the problematic view that culture is transformed by human ingenuity alone. Yoder soundly rejects any notion that the coming of the kingdom ultimately depends on us:

¹⁰ Yoder, "Spirit of God and Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 228.

¹¹ Yoder, "Jesus: A Model of Radical Political Action," in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 78.

As a servant people we are relaxed. The weight of the world has been lifted from our shoulders; we are not the managers of society—nor would we be if we thought we were. We don't have to save democracy and the free world; we don't even have to save ourselves...Should we be ineffective, our cause is not lost; should our efforts bear fruit, this will not be their justification. Our living in the present reality of the kingdom and the triumphant coming of the kingdom are not connected like the links in a causal chain, but like promise and fulfillment, as the artesian well to the distant mountain lake. We serve not in order that the kingdom might come, but because it is coming; the certainty of victory is the beginning not the end of our course.¹²

The Spirit is thus God's empowering presence that enables humans to live the way God intended—an empowerment that is not merely religious but has to do with all realms of life.

When we see the Spirit and the kingdom in this light, it breaks down all political-nonpolitical dualisms and highlights that redemption has inherently to do with questions of culture, politics, economics, and so on. The pressing need, then, is to choose between different ways of being political and cultural, some that stand in line with the kingdom and others that do not:

1. Vengeance or forgiveness
2. Domination or servanthood
3. Rigidity or concessions
4. Misinformation or truth telling
5. Determination or hope
6. Manipulation or dialogue
7. Hierarchy or equality
8. Ideology or objectivity¹³

¹² Yoder, "The Lordship of Christ and the Power Struggle," in *The Lordship of Christ: Proceedings of the Seventh Mennonite World Conference*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963).

¹³ The following list is quoted verbatim from Yoder, "Kingdom of God and Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 234. For more elaboration of these points, see 228-233.

The real question is therefore not *whether* the people of God will be involved in matters such as these, but which issues have priority and what methods should be used.

Empowered by God's Spirit, the Christian community will have a singular contribution to make, enabling God's reign to be seen and made known in culture.¹⁴

Ecclesiology

Yoder's eschatology emphasizes the already-not yet nature of the kingdom and his pneumatology connects the Spirit to the kingdom, with all that that entails for the redemption of culture. It follows from this that he sees the church as firstfruits, a foretaste, a testing ground, and a model of the Spirit's sociopolitical work of redemption.¹⁵ The key practices of the church that constitute the sacraments are therefore not qualitatively different from what God expects of the world. There are not two planes, a religious and secular, but two communities, one which recognizes the true *telos* of human life and lives toward it and another which does not. As such, the church's life is both paradigmatic and public. Yoder explains this by criticizing and building on the thought of Karl Barth.

Yoder finds Barth's "Christian Community and Civil Community" unsatisfactory in large part because Barth conceives the two communities as having a distinct essence, one public and accessible, the other private and esoteric.¹⁶ As a result, Barth tries to

¹⁴ See Yoder, "Kingdom of God and Politics of Men," in *For the Nations*, 235.

¹⁵ These images are taken from Yoder, "Firstfruits," and "Kingdom of God and Politics of Men," 228, both in *For the Nations*.

¹⁶ See Karl Barth, "Christian Community and Civil Community," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth*, ed. Will Herberg (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1960), esp. 171-189.

bridge the gap between the two by drawing analogies, most of which, Yoder notes, look arbitrary and un-Barthian in their apparent haphazardness. In *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, however, Yoder contends that Barth has overcome this problematic dualism and therefore depicts Gospel order as paradigm. So Yoder approvingly quotes Barth, stating, “Church law is exemplary law. For all its particularity, it is a pattern for the formation and administration of human law generally, and therefore the law of other political, economic, cultural and other human societies.”¹⁷ Yoder then glosses Barth’s point, saying, “The calling of the people of God is thus no different from the calling of all humanity. The difference between the human community as a whole (“*Bürgergemeinde*”) and the faith community (“*Christengemeinde*”) is a matter of awareness or knowledge or commitment or celebration, but not of ultimate destiny. What believers are called to is not different from what all humanity is called to. That Jesus Christ is Lord is a statement not about my inner piety or my intellect or ideas but about the cosmos.”¹⁸ Said differently, there are not two kingdoms, but one.¹⁹

A central way to see this point is to look at Israel in the Old Testament.²⁰ When God sets Israel apart, he calls them to live an exemplary life, a life not confined to the cultic aspect. As a priestly kingdom (Exod. 19:6), every aspect of Israel’s life was meant to exemplify God’s ways in God’s world. Although Yoder does not draw on specific

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 719.

¹⁸ Yoder, “Firstfruits,” in *For the Nations*, 24.

¹⁹ Cf. Yoder, “The Two Kingdoms,” *Christus Victor* 106 (Sept. 1959): 3-7.

²⁰ Yoder discusses this point in “A Light to the Nations,” *Concern* 9 (Mar. 1961), 15. My comments about Israel go beyond Yoder in that essay but they make the same point.

examples, there are many readily available: Whether in tilling the fields, making provision for the poor, lending without usury, honoring a neighbor's marriage, or trading with just weights, Israel is called to do God's will. In this sense, all of life is religion. The liturgy or service offered by God's priestly people takes place not only in the tabernacle but in the fields, the marketplace, and the home. So although Yoder is speaking of the church when he says that "the faith community and the human community are connatural; each is human, historical, social... The order of the faith community constitutes a public offer to the entire society,"²¹ an appeal to God's work in the Old Testament only serves to further buttress his point. God's offer to the world in and through his people is not to join a mystery cult but to enable the mundane cultural life of humanity to be lived more abundantly. This, then, is the way in which the church is a sacrament of the kingdom: "It tells the world what is the world's own calling and destiny, not by announcing either a utopia or a realistic goal to be imposed on the whole society, but by 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 the way."²²

The Sacraments as Pioneering Power and Practices

Yoder's metaphor of the church as a pioneer people is particularly apt because it conveys not ecclesiomonism but the missionary nature of the church as fundamentally *for*, not against, the nations. That is, God intends to bring the world further along the

²¹ Yoder, "Firstfruits," in *For the Nations*, 27.

²² Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," in *Royal Priesthood*, 373.

cultural trail blazed by his people, for pioneers may be the first to arrive at a place, but they are not the last.²³ Indeed, the Spirit-empowered pioneer people go forth precisely with the task and intent of forging the proper way ahead for the sake of those who follow along in their train, as they themselves simply follow in the victory train of the pioneer and author of the faith. The sacraments, as social processes, are thus seen not simply as the means to the end, but the end (or fullness of the kingdom) as present already in these means. To participate in these processes is therefore both to show the way to the ultimate transformation of culture and to celebrate the way the end has already transformed culture in the present.

The Observable Nature of the Sacraments

Yoder lists five pioneering practices of the church: baptism, the Lord's Supper, binding and loosing, the universality of giftedness, and the open meeting.²⁴ Although the last three are not generally labeled as sacraments, Yoder highlights nine characteristics that these practices share in common:²⁵

1. Each action is wholly human, not esoteric, but also an act of God "in, with, and under the human practice."

²³ Cf. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 69.

²⁴ One need not agree with labeling all five of these practices as sacraments to see the value in Yoder's creative work here.

²⁵ The following list is summarized from Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," in *Royal Priesthood*, 369-372. One need not agree to every detail of Yoder's sacramentology to see its usefulness for others within the Christian tradition. Indeed, Yoder's own pioneering project has been followed by others making similar points from within the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Mennonite, and Pentecostal traditions. For example, see the essays in *The Blackwell Companion to Ethics* and James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

2. These practices are social, such that language of sociology (not philosophy or semantics) is most appropriate.
3. These practices can be paradigmatic for other social groups.
4. They are not “religious” or “ritual” activities, but “public” phenomena.
5. These practices are “enabled and illuminated by Jesus of Nazareth, who is confessed as Messiah and Lord.”
6. These practices focus on the believing community as the primary agent of change, rather than isolated individuals.
7. None of the five practices was new in and of itself, but each was taken up by Jesus and the early church, such that their meaning and source of power was new.
8. These practices do not depend on one specific meta-ethical discourse (e.g., deontological, consequentialist, or virtue ethics).
9. These practices transcend traditional dichotomies, including “Protestant/Catholic,” “radical/liberal,” and “revelation/reason.”

For our purposes, Yoder’s first and fourth entries in this list are most relevant. With respect to the first, Yoder clearly underscores that the Spirit is the empowering source behind these practices. With respect to the fourth, Yoder risks being misunderstood, but his rhetorical point is that the sacraments should not be seen as rituals in a mystery cult that are completely unintelligible to non-members, but as mundane mysteries in that the Spirit works in and through these sacraments to inform a new way of being a cultural, public people, precisely because these practices are not “religious” *over against* “cultural,” but religious inasmuch as they are cultural processes directed toward their proper telos.

This explains why Yoder repeatedly refers to the sacraments as “social,” “public,” or “secular.” In labeling the sacraments in this way, he does not mean that they are *merely* social processes devoid of any activity of the Spirit.²⁶ Instead, he is attempting to

²⁶ Against those who might presume that Yoder’s sacramentology is reductionistic, we can see elsewhere in his corpus that he is not. For example, Yoder focuses elsewhere on the numerous layers of meaning inherent in the Lord’s Supper. He identifies eleven such layers that are biblical: (1) thanksgiving

underscore that these are activities of the church that can be seen and observed by the watching world, just as Israel's life was meant to be a light to the nations. Just as a social scientist ought to be able to observe and describe the difference between Torah and the social-political life called for in other ancient codes, so Yoder thinks a social scientist ought to be able to observe and describe differences between how the church and the wider world deal with issues such as decision-making, power, money, and forgiveness. Although the world may not use the church's language to account for the church's life together, the world can see a difference in the church's life together.²⁷

The Transformative Power of the Sacraments

In *Body Politics*, Yoder does not simply discuss the sacraments for their own sake, but shows how these practices have been transformative in the life of the church as well as the world. That is, as the church pioneers culture, the world can draw upon the church's life-giving power and practices to enable its own life to be better than it would otherwise be. My account of these practices therefore focuses on the way in which they reflect a transformation not only within the Christian community but beyond.

which is made before every meal, (2) Celebration of Passover, (3) the act of sharing food, (4) a memorial of the Lord's death and suffering, (5) a memorial of the Lord's resurrection, (6) the love feast, (7) the communion of goods, (8) the unity of the body of Christ, (9) a reminder of Christ's death that calls us to worthy participation, (10) a hopeful proclamation because it is to be done until Christ comes again, and (11) a proto-sacramental meaning, in which the act has a meaning that is more than the act itself. This list is found in Yoder, "The Lord's Supper in Historical Perspective," General Papers, Associated Mennonite Bible Seminary Library (originally presented at Assembly Congregation, Goshen, IN, Nov. 26, 1978). I deal with this issue more fully in Branson Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn: Why Yoder Is Not an Ethicist," in *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder*, ed. John C. Nugent (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010).

²⁷ If this were not so, it would falsify numerous biblical texts about the visible difference between God's people and the watching world and the world's awareness of that difference.

Binding and Loosing

A key aspect of binding and loosing is the process of confrontation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.²⁸ Yoder draws on a variety of biblical texts, including Matthew 18:15-18: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him to be you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Yoder makes several observations about the reconciliation called for in this text.²⁹ First, the initiative to confront and address the problem is personal, not a special function of the clergy. Second, the goal of the confrontation is to restore relationships and bring about reconciliation, not to punish the offender. Third, Jesus does not outline a distinction between major and minor offenses. All offenses can be forgiven, but none is negligible. Finally, the goal of this process is not to protect the church’s reputation but to serve the offender’s own well-being by walking through this process of restoration. If this text is taken to heart, the members of the church should reject both legalism and indifference, and they should embrace loving confrontation and forgiveness. What gives the disciples the right and the power to forgive? Yoder points out that Jesus empowers his disciples to do this by giving them the Spirit (John 20:22-23).

²⁸ Yoder also discusses communal moral discernment under this heading, but it is less relevant for my purposes.

²⁹ The following summarizes Yoder, *Body Politics*, 2-3.

Yoder sees the transformative effect of this biblical prescription in the growing social science of conflict resolution.³⁰ Without using specifically religious language, this process aims to avoid both civil litigation and, sometimes, criminal prosecution.³¹ This process begins with a concrete offense and seeks to resolve the problem created by the offense. The focus is thus not simply to punish the offender but to have the offender acknowledge the reality and human face of their offense. In addition, concern for the victim is central in this process, unlike the punitive process of the criminal courts. Often, mediators are involved, and they will make clear that the process of reconciliation is not a zero-sum game. Rather, it is presumed that there can be a solution that brings healing and progress for all involved. As a result, the threat of publicity and shame are kept to a minimum.³² Those who serve as mediators should be competent and caring, and they are often accredited by colleagues and validated by their experience. If the negotiations or reconciliation process fails, the party refusing to reconcile is publicly disavowed and the only course of action is to either let the injustice remain or call for the civil powers to carry out their due process. This entire process exemplifies Yoder's point that, when wrongs have been done, the way to healing is through truth and reconciliation. That, he

³⁰ On conflict resolution, see Yoder, "The Science of Conflict," in *War of the Lamb*, 125-134.

³¹ The following summarizes Yoder, *Body Politics*, 12.

³² This is not to say that public knowledge of the offense is necessarily excluded. One could imagine scenarios where a key part of repentance and reconciliation would be the public acknowledgement of the wrongs done. Yoder's concern is that publicity not be used as a weapon turned back against the offender. In that case, what happens is not restoration and reconciliation, but publicity is used as a tool of shame or scandal for its own sake. By the same token, a truly repentant offender should not object too strenuously to a certain level of publicity. For example, there can and should be publicity in cases where the nature of the offense requires a broader accountability than can be provided in a person-to-person context.

states, is “true in the Gospel; it is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, in the world,”³³ a reality seen and testified to by a variety of witnesses, including many who do not claim the name of Christ but nevertheless see that forgiveness goes with the grain of the universe.³⁴

The Lord's Supper: Breaking Bread

One of the central practices of Jesus and the early church was sharing meals with one another, as well as other forms of economic sharing.³⁵ Building on this practice, Yoder argues that when the church breaks bread together, this should not be seen only as a set apart “ritual” practice but also as an ordinary, day-to-day economic sharing that is suffused with a new understanding of what it means to partake together of the goods that God has provided for his people. For Yoder, breaking bread does not just symbolize sustenance but “bread *is* daily sustenance. Bread eaten together *is* economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family. When in most of his post-resurrection appearances Jesus took up again his wonted role of the family head distributing bread (and fish) around the table, he projected into the post-Passion world the common table of the pre-Passion wandering disciple band, whose members had left their

³³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 13. Yoder’s book was written too soon to point to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, but it seems to me a clear example of the conflict resolution of which Yoder speaks.

³⁴ For example, Yoder references Hannah Arendt’s emphasis on forgiveness in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 237-238.

³⁵ References to these practices and questions that arose surrounding it include Acts 2:42, 46; 4:32-37; 6:1-4; 15:1-35. See also 1 Corinthians chapters 8, 10, and 11. Rather than utilizing philosophical tools to try to interpret Jesus’ words of institution, Yoder focuses on what Jesus’ words would have meant to their original hearers, arguing that the most basic meaning is the practice of table-sharing and breaking bread together.

prior economic bases to join his movement.”³⁶ Yoder is playing here on the Greek words *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (law), from which we get the English word “economy.” The practice of Jesus and his disciples transforms who is considered part of one’s household and therefore changes the way one thinks about economics. Just as the members of the household work together as one unit, each responsibly doing what they can and each graciously receiving what they need, so the church is called to practice this type of economics.³⁷

This vision of being householders rather than competitors can and has been applied in the wider world in a variety of ways. Although Yoder does not use the term “common good” in this context, the policies and principles he references all in some way recognize that reality. Those examples include forgiveness of debts (e.g., bankruptcy); low-interest and no-interest loans; public funding of roads, schools, and welfare support; international debt amnesty; equal opportunity; economic cooperation; and certain forms of socialism.³⁸ These various practices underscore that the basis of the human community, as a “household,” is deeper than a thin “economic” vision of the human person or community would have it.

³⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 20. Cf. Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process,” 365.

³⁷ Yoder notes that the church’s broader use of goods stems from the practice of sharing meals, not from speculation about “ideal economic relations.” Yoder, *Body Politics*, 17.

³⁸ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 25, and “Firstfruits,” 32.

Baptism

A crucial aspect of Paul's ministry and the mystery of the Gospel he preached was the unity of Jews and Gentiles in one new body.³⁹ Two texts are particularly significant for Yoder. First, he translates 2 Corinthians 5:17 as follows: "If anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"⁴⁰ Second, he translates Galatians 3:27-28: "Baptized in Christ, you are clothed in Christ, and there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴¹ Paul's point, Yoder argues, is that when someone is baptized into the body of Christ, prior definitions of identity are transcended.⁴² Paul has seen the evidence of this in his own ministry, and he speaks of the mystery only lately revealed, namely, that Gentiles have been included in God's covenant purposes and promises. Baptism is thus the merging of the Jewish and Gentile peoples and stories, in which the inheritance of Abraham is open to all, by faith rather than birth. When the Jew-Gentile barrier is relativized in Christ, it becomes apparent that other barriers are also overcome, including those of gender and socio-economic class. For Yoder, baptism into Christ does not erase identities, such as Jew, Gentile, male, or female. Rather than ignoring the real differences between these identities, the unity of baptism maintains but transforms them through

³⁹ See 2 Cor. 5:14-17; Gal. 3:27-29; Eph. 2:11-3:13.

⁴⁰ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 28. For more thorough exegetical work on the text of 2 Cor. 5:17, see Yoder, "There is a Whole New World': The Apostle's Apology Revisited," in *To Hear the Word*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 1-24. The New Century Version translates this verse in a similar way.

⁴¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 29.

⁴² Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 367.

Christ. Instead of suppressing identity in favor of an abstract unity, Yoder acknowledges identity and subjects it to the concrete unity of the body of Christ.⁴³

Yoder identifies three transforming effects of baptism in the broader world. First, the Enlightenment legacy made much of the equality of all mankind, drawing partly on a Stoic affirmation of the dignity of all and partly on the Reformed appeal to the equality of all as creatures of God. Modern notions of liberty, equality, and rights can be traced to these sources, including the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, which Yoder sees as a secular version of the unity proclaimed by Scripture. Moreover, in the messages proclaimed by abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr., we hear a message of judgment on sin and selfishness and a proclamation that all have dignity because of God's grace.⁴⁴

A second transformative effect of baptism is that repentance and change are possible. Against strictly behaviorist understandings of humanity, Yoder contends that baptism affirms that sinners are not doomed to repeat their past. Thus, the possibility of repentance can be communicated in the world at large. One example of this is the nonviolence of Gandhi and King.⁴⁵ The goal of nonviolence is not the destruction of the enemy but conversion. By appealing to the conscience of the oppressor and by refusing to let past or present guilt determine the oppressor's identity, the nonviolent resistor holds out hope that the oppressor can change. Importantly, the ultimate ground of this change is

⁴³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 30.

⁴⁴ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 35.

⁴⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 41.

the power of God proclaimed in baptism, not a generic belief in the goodness of humanity. Rather, repentance and reconciliation “is possible for all because it has already been celebrated in Christian baptism by some of us.”⁴⁶ Thus, even when not explicitly proclaimed, we can see and know that the Spirit is working beyond the church because we know how the Spirit works within the church.

A third transformative effect of baptism is religious liberty.⁴⁷ In the early church, baptism entailed the joining of (at least) two different cultures and peoples. The church, however, did not force baptism upon the city or the nation at large, allowing non-Christians the freedom to reject the Gospel. The corollary of this, Yoder argues, is a civil order that grants its citizens true religious freedom.

The Universality of Giftedness

A fourth sacrament is the universality of giftedness for the edification of the body.⁴⁸ These gifts originate in the work of the Spirit and therefore leave no room for spiritual pride. Moreover, they are given for the common good, not just for personal aggrandizement. Consequently, it is a misnomer to refer to just one role that deserves the title of “minister” in the body. For Yoder, that move is not Pauline. Every member is a minister gifted by the Spirit. Therefore, all are priests in the sense that all are Spirit-

⁴⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 42.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 42-43.

⁴⁸ Relevant texts include 1 Cor. 12:7; 14:1-40; and Eph. 4:8-13. Yoder discusses this topic further in *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987).

empowered to serve their fellow members of the body.⁴⁹ As a result, power is not seen as the prerogative of a high office, to be hoarded and used to rule over the rest of the body. Instead, it is diffuse and service-oriented, reorienting the notion of ministry so that “there would be no one ungifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated.”⁵⁰ For Yoder, the power of creation and politics of Jesus come through in a Spirit-empowered life for the common good.

Yoder argues that the universality of giftedness transforms how we think about human community and culture in general. He argues that the plurality of gifts holds true for any complex task that requires a multitude of functions, and he gives examples such as the city, the university, the research team, and the division of labor.⁵¹ Yoder contends that, given the Pauline vision, businesses based on teamwork and mutual feedback will make better cars and sell better software than those based on entrenched hierarchical models.⁵² Importantly for Yoder, collaborative and deliberative business models are not simply true because they work, but they work because, unbeknownst to many who practice them, their ultimate grounding is the new possibilities of being human afforded by the humanity and Lordship of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

In addition, just as all are ministers in the body of Christ, so within the larger society, all have a role to play in contributing to the common good. The corollary of

⁴⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 56.

⁵⁰ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 60.

⁵¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 58.

⁵² Indeed, Yoder was unfortunately prescient when he declared that “Paul’s solidarity models of deliberation correlate with the reasons that the Japanese can make better cars than Detroit.” Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process,” in *Royal Priesthood*, 370.

sacerdotalism in the church is an overemphasis on statecraft as the primary way to contribute to the common good. Yoder's vision of the common good stresses the importance of faithfulness in mundane things. In 1979, Yoder stressed that

who is in high office or what laws are written will make less difference for many indices of where things will have gone by the year 2000 than the cumulation of an infinity of tiny deeds: mothers who feed their children, children who learn their lessons, craftsmen who finish a job, doctors who get the dosage right, drivers who stay on the road, and policemen who hold their fire... The predilection to see one's own small deed as significant or as right when and because it can be shown to contribute to some overall victory scenario overburdens punctual responsibility in decision and undervalues the continuities of character and covenant. The kingdom is like the grain growing while no one watches (Mark 4:26f.), like the hidden leaven silently taking over the flour bin (Matt. 13:33).⁵³

Because all members are respected as an integral part of the whole no matter what their role, they are empowered to embrace their responsibility and the meaning it gives as a vital part of contributing to the good of the whole.

Open Meeting

The fifth and final sacrament that Yoder discusses is the open meeting. Drawing upon Paul's instructions for an orderly meeting in 1 Corinthians 14, Yoder terms this "the Rule of Paul," namely, that everyone be allowed the opportunity to speak. Yoder sees this as applicable to both the regular meetings of the church body and to occasions that address specific issues or questions for deliberations. Just as the universality of giftedness means that all members are called to contribute to the life of the body, so the Spirit's presence in each member means that all can speak and contribute to the edification and deliberation of the congregation. This process overlaps with binding and loosing, and

⁵³ Yoder, "Discerning the Kingdom of God," in *For the Nations*, 244.

Yoder again references Acts 15 as a model, with participants sharing experiences of the Spirit's work and drawing upon Scripture to inform deliberation. Yoder notes similarities between this practice and gives several examples from church history, including early synods in Cappadocia and later emphases in Luther, Zwingli, and the Swiss Anabaptists.⁵⁴ For Yoder, until there has been open dialogue, with all interested parties enabled to speak, the church should not go forward. Only when there is trust that the Spirit will speak in and through the conversation of the gathered deliberative body will there be a willingness to listen to other members of the body, with trust that God is using each one to bring wisdom before the group as a whole. Yoder expects that the results will be like those proclaimed in Acts 15:28: "It seemed good to the Spirit and to us." Importantly, this emphasis on the Spirit does not operate apart from roles, structures, and proper procedure, but precisely in, with, and under those roles, structures, and proper procedure.⁵⁵

According to Yoder, this practice of open meeting and conciliarism transforms culture and leads to democratic forms in the civil order. Yoder lists three contributing factors.⁵⁶ First, Calvin's vision of society and its connection with conciliarism shaped thinking about the broader civil order. Second, Yoder, citing A. D. Lindsay, puts forth the idea that Anglo-Saxon democracy (different from the Enlightenment democracy of the Continent) extends the experience and practice of the Puritan meeting to democracy as

⁵⁴ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 63-64.

⁵⁵ Yoder lists four roles in particular: agents of direction, agents of memory, agents of linguistic self-consciousness, and agents of order and due process. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 29-34.

⁵⁶ Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 368, n. 12.

practiced in England and New England.⁵⁷ Third, as time went by, Reformed communities found themselves many times in positions of dissent rather than government, a position that contributed to their emphasis on civil rights. The direct influence of Gospel order on civil order explains why Yoder is more positive toward democracy than other forms of governance.

In “The Christian Case for Democracy,” Yoder first argues that democracy is not qualitatively different from all other configurations of political power and, as such, it should not be deified as *the* political structure *par excellence*. The *demos* can be as tyrannical and demonic as any dictator.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Yoder argues for and approves of a particular strand of democracy, understood as the practice of granting a voice to all within society, including the underdog and oppressed: “The irreducible bulwark of social freedom is the dignity of dissent; the ability of the outsider, the other, the critic to speak and be heard. This is not majority rule; it is minority leverage... The crucial need is not to believe that ‘we, the people’ are ruling ourselves. It is to commit ourselves to defending *their* right to be heard.”⁵⁹ The irony and strength of the experiments pioneered by Roger Williams and William Penn is that they applied gospel order to civil order, thereby

⁵⁷Cf. also Yoder, *Body Politics*, 67; and “The Christian Case for Democracy,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 168.

⁵⁸ David Koyzis makes a similar point about democracy. Cf. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 124-151.

⁵⁹ Yoder, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” in *Priestly Kingdom*, 167 (emphasis original). Jeffrey Stout offers an account of “thick” conversation that, he argues, should characterize a health democracy. There are certain affinities between Stout and Yoder on this score. Cf. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), especially chapter 12, “Ethics as a Social Practice.” Romand Coles also draws upon Yoder’s thought to inform his own view of democracy in “The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder: ‘Outsiders’ and the ‘Otherness of the Church,’” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 3 (2002): 305-331.

grounding religious freedom in a robustly religious reason, namely, the willingness to learn from any and every member of the assembly.⁶⁰ Although Yoder does not want to deify democracy, he contends that it is the effect of the Spirit's transformative work just to the extent that it entails a willingness to listen and grant respect to all voices.

Conclusion

When Yoder summarizes the work of the Spirit through the sacraments, he asks "Have we happened onto a deep logic of things?"⁶¹ Although he initially backs away from affirming any overconfident proclamation of a discovery of a new "system," he nevertheless contends that "it should not be surprising if there were such a deep structure that, once discerned in the five places where we have touched it, would then illuminate more broadly the shape of all God's saving purposes."⁶² That is, Yoder points to continuity and coherence in the cultural practices that God calls for throughout human history. The way God was leading his people in the Old Testament brought them to the fulfillment of the covenant through the Messiah and the promised Spirit. Moreover, the ultimate destiny of the world is expressed already in the life of the church in such a way that it necessarily affects and transforms culture beyond the Christian community. Yoder's sacramentology thus affirms that there is a reliable rhythm to the purposes of the Trinitarian God, further demonstrating the continuity and coherence between the power

⁶⁰ Yoder, "Civil Religion in America," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 180-181.

⁶¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 79.

⁶² Yoder, *Body Politics*, 80.

of creation, the politics of Jesus, and the pioneering public practices produced by the Spirit-empowered pilgrim people.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Theologies of culture often focus on either Christ or creation to the exclusion of the other. In this dissertation I have argued that Yoder offers a way beyond this impasse and offers an alternative in his Trinitarian theology of culture, which upholds the continuity and coherence between creation and redemption. In this conclusion, I summarize the argument of this dissertation and delineate implications of the proper coherence of creation and redemption. Moreover, far from being sectarian, Yoder's work is irenic and ecumenical insofar as the continuity between creation and redemption outlines the way to true transformation of culture. That is, Yoder shows how to get what Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr wanted all along: true effectiveness in engaging the wider world; a responsible and proactive approach to the pressing social issues of our day; a Trinitarian emphasis; a creation-affirming approach to culture; and authentic transformation of culture.

Being Trinitarian: Yoder's Theology of Culture

Many scholars either focus on creation to the detriment of Christ or on Christ to the detriment of creation. Several commentators on Yoder's work place him in the latter camp. In contrast, I have argued that Yoder's work is best understood as presenting a Trinitarian theology of culture. That is, proper Trinitarian thought posits a unity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and therefore a unity to what God desires in the cultural life

of humanity. In chapter 2, I demonstrated that Reinhold Niebuhr's social ethics and H. Richard Niebuhr's theology of culture are interwoven with their broader theology. Thus, Yoder does not simply disagree with Reinhold's anti-pacifism or with H. Richard's characterization of Mennonites. Rather, his disagreement with them has to do with core doctrinal issues, including doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, creation, and resurrection. In chapter 3, I argued that Yoder's thought is compatible with the christological and trinitarian content of Nicea and Chalcedon. If Yoder was anti-Trinitarian and denounced the substance of these creeds, it would be questionable to characterize his thought as presenting a trinitarian theology of culture. By placing Yoder's understanding of the creeds within the larger context of his theology, one can see that he does not disagree with the substance of Nicea and Chalcedon nor does he deny the ongoing and ever-present need to adequately translate the truth of the Gospel in new contexts and thought worlds.

Chapter 4 demonstrates that, for Yoder, the biblical affirmation of the humanity and divinity of Jesus are central to a theology of culture. As a fully human person and as Israel's Messiah, Jesus is directly relevant to culture, politics, economics, and other questions of social ethics. As fully divine, Jesus creates, sustains, and directs all things and, in him, all things hold together. In chapter 5, I argued that, for Yoder, the power of Jesus re-establishes the politics of creation. By moving through Yoder's account of creation, fall, and redemption, I made clear that he presents an ontology of peaceful power in which humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and in which the Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing. Careful scrutiny of

Yoder's corpus as a whole therefore reveals a robust doctrine of creation that coheres with redemption. For many scholars, however, his rejection of the sword reveals a deficient doctrine of creation. In chapter 6, I demonstrated that, for Yoder, the sword-bearing state is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation. This being the case, God's providential allowance of the sword must not be confused or conflated with God's creative and redemptive will. Finally, chapter 7 showed that Yoder's pneumatology and sacramentology are directly connected to the authentic transformation of culture. This transformation is dependent on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking kingdom of God. When the power of creation and the politics of Jesus are unleashed by the person of the Spirit, the public practices of the church inevitably overflow and exert transformative effects not only in the church but in all of human culture.

Being Cultural: Creation and Redemption

Yoder contends that across the ages there is but one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—working out his plan for the world. There is unity and continuity to this Trinitarian God and there is unity and continuity to the drama of Scripture. By emphasizing the continuity and coherence between creation and redemption, we can build on Yoder's thought to extrapolate and articulate more thoroughly what it means to consistently hold to a trinitarian theology of culture.

Yoder's position clearly entails a rejection of any Gnostic view of culture and life in this world. God created the world good. A key aspect of this goodness is the inherent goodness of human social life, ordered to both the glory of God and the flourishing of all

creation. God created the Powers as good servants of human shalom, meant to provide order, stability, and coherence to human life. He created humans to exercise and participate in the peaceful power of love, servanthood, truth-telling, creativity, and trust in God alone. Indeed, as God's royal image, humanity was created to be a channel of God's power, caring for and ministering to all of creation. This includes the development of culture in a manner that goes with the grain of the universe.

As Yoder repeatedly emphasizes, redemption should be seen as the redemption of creation. Jesus, as the true *imago Dei* and second Adam, exercises power by imitating the Father: he loves his enemies and serves his friends. When the Word, the agent of creation, assumes our flesh for our redemption, we see in him the grain of the universe and the politics of creation fully unveiled. This revelation takes place not in a pristine Eden but in the midst of a hurting, fallen, and rebellious world. The power of creation is therefore manifest in Jesus' following the path of cross and resurrection on the way to ascension and glorification. When worked out as a concrete social strategy, Jesus' approach is what Yoder terms revolutionary subordination. Importantly, this emulates God's strategy throughout Scripture of avoiding total annihilation of his creation and instead seeking to redeem it. Revolutionary subordination does not entail the destruction of creation, but the in-breaking of God's kingdom in the midst of other kingdoms. This leaven-like kingdom releases humans from the grip of sin. In doing so, the power of creation is unleashed from the shackles of sin and re-worked into the ties that bind all things together through redemptive and suffering love.

Being Coherent: Implications of Continuity between Creation and Redemption

Several implications follow from the coherence and continuity of creation and redemption. Since creation and redemption cohere, then true natural law cannot be opposed to Christ. If Jesus tells his followers to live a certain way or calls them to certain practices, those things cannot contradict God's ultimate intentions in creation. If human sin had never entered God's world, some of these practices would not be needed. For example, cross-bearing would unnecessary if there was no sin. God's design for life, however, always included self-giving love and mutuality, two things that are instantiated in the postlapsarian practice of cross-bearing. But inasmuch as cross-bearing represents a *refusal* of a fallen response to evil, it is a creational-messianic practice. The one who bears a cross does not allow sin, death, or the devil to have a final say about how power ought to be exercised but instead follows Jesus in entrusting oneself to God.

Since creation and redemption cohere, the first Adam cannot be normative over against Jesus, the second Adam. In the language of Hebrews 8:5, we ought to be suspicious of approaches to culture that do not adequately emphasize that Adam is but a "type" and "shadow" of Jesus, and this includes matters of culture. In the language of Ephesians 5:31-32, the union between Adam and Eve points to the deeper reality of Christ and the church, and this includes matters of culture. In the language of Colossians 1:15, Jesus, not Adam, is the true image of the invisible God and the pre-eminent one in all creation. This focus on Christ does not eclipse creation; rather, properly understood, it underscores that because Christ is both Creator and *true* Adam, we see God's creational intent for human life and culture *best* when we look to Jesus and the activity of his Spirit.

Since creation and redemption cohere, then faithfulness cannot be set against effectiveness or responsibility, properly defined and understood. We see this consummately in Jesus. Indeed, Jesus refuses to follow Cain's path of irresponsibility for his brother and instead bears his brothers' sins upon himself. Although faithfulness unto death, even death on a cross, might appear ineffective on the world's register, the resurrection confirms that God is not dead, a reality that opens up unforeseen cruciform possibilities for effective action. Because the Second Adam is also the divine Word, we have the ultimate grounds for knowing what action is most effective, namely, that which conforms to the Crucified Lamb. So the way of Jesus is right precisely because "it goes with the grain of the universe, and that is why *in the long run* nothing else will work."¹ For those who have eyes to see the doxological vision of Revelation 5, the way of faithfulness is, ultimately, the way of effectiveness.

Since creation and redemption cohere, the distinctiveness and transformative effect of God's people are not two different options but two sides of the same coin. Because they live in a postlapsarian world, God's people will necessarily be attentive to ways in which they are called to be set apart and different from the surrounding world. Just as God called Abraham out of Babylon in order to form a people who would bless the nations, so the church must distance itself from Babylon. God's people must always keep in mind, however, that they are set apart *from* the nations so that they can be *for* the nations. If the church deems its set-apartness as an end in itself, it does not account for

¹ Yoder, "The Political Meaning of Hope," in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, eds. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 62.

God's work of redemption. Just as God sent his people back to Babylon with Jeremiah's injunction to "seek the peace of the city where you dwell," so the church must be in Babylon, with Babylon, and for Babylon. Of course, the church can do this only inasmuch as it is not of Babylon, recognizing that its citizenship is in a city whose foundations cannot be shaken and whose builder and maker is God.

Finally, since creation and redemption cohere, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 ought to be seen as the continuation of the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26-28. When Jesus tells his disciples to go forth and make disciples, he is not simply telling them to spread a message that will enable individuals to attain a particular postmortem destination. As rightful Lord of the cosmos, Jesus is commanding his disciples to work out in the power of the Spirit what that Lordship means for all facets of human life. Christianity, then, should be seen not as a "religion" in the compartmentalized modern sense, but as a new way of being social, cultural, political, and economic. In other words, to be ecclesial and to be public are not two different realms or spheres. Redemption is as broad as creation, and so to follow the Great Commission will entail working out new Spirit-empowered ways of dealing with questions relating to matters such as conflict, money, forgiveness, community order and roles, technology, and justice. These matters are not merely guided by a broad and sometimes epistemologically-vague appeal to creation, but by the specific life and Spirit of the Lord of creation. So, cultural practices and institutions that operate oppositionally to the way of Jesus also go against the grain of universe. The redemption of culture must therefore entail a whole host of strategies for engagement, including rejection, adaptation, transformation, and, most crucially,

pioneering new forms of culture that enable a hurting world to envision cultural possibilities not perceived or even imagined without a pioneering community that blazes the trail.

Under the forces of human sin and evil, things fall apart. Often times, this disintegration appears to be the most real thing about our world. Yet, while we do not yet see all things in subjection to him, we do see Jesus, the pioneer of our faith who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God as Lord of an unshakeable kingdom, of which we are the heirs. In the power of creation, the politics of Jesus, and the Spirit-empowered practices of God's people, God is binding his creation back together—this time bound by the healing power of love rather than the destructive force of sin. Thus we confess that by the grace of the Father, the power of the Son, and the presence of the Spirit, all things hold together.

APPENDIX A: THESES

Theses Related to Dissertation

1. John Howard Yoder's theology of culture is Trinitarian inasmuch as it upholds the continuity and coherence between God's work in creation and redemption. What God desires for human cultural life as revealed in creation does not contradict what God desires for human cultural life as revealed in redemption.
2. Yoder's Christology affirms the divinity and humanity of Jesus. As a fully human Jewish person, Jesus directly addresses culture, politics, economics, and other questions of social ethics. As fully divine, Jesus creates, sustains, and directs all things such that, in him, all things hold together.
3. Contrary to certain scholars, Yoder has a doctrine of creation. In his account of creation, fall, and redemption, he presents an ontology of peaceful power in which humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and the Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing.
4. For Yoder, the sword-bearing state is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation.
5. Yoder views the transformation of culture as dependent on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Although this transformation ought to be manifest particularly in the church, the public life of the church will also have a transformative effect on the surrounding and watching world.

Theses Related to Course Work

6. The concept of vocation ought to be reserved for those roles, offices, and stations that contribute to the common good. Therefore, those occupations that do not build up or contribute to the common good cannot be qualified as vocations in the proper sense.
7. Augustine rightly shows that what is worshiped and loved in an ultimate sense will have a profound effect on human social life. As a result, social ethics and politics cannot be disconnected from doxology and religion.

8. Karl Barth's Christological formulation of the *imago Dei* emphasizes the biblical centrality of Jesus Christ for interpreting the *imago Dei*. Barth's interpretation of the *imago Dei* also underscores that true human freedom is in doing the good, not in the formal ability to choose between good and evil.
9. Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity should be addressed primarily at the practical level, not merely at the intellectual level. Thus, the church's faithfulness to its calling is an integral aspect of upholding the truth claims of Christianity.
10. Hegel's explication of the Trinity is a helpful tool in clarifying and exposing his philosophy as a whole.

Theses Related to Personal Interest

11. William James' religious epistemology can be helpfully employed to explain why the visible difference between the church and world has a profound effect on evangelism. Beliefs may be alive or dead to different individuals. Part of what may make belief in the Christian God a live option is the consistency of the church's life with the message it proclaims.
12. Although personal Bible reading is important, communal reading, interpretation, and application of Scripture ought to be the primary way that Christians engage the Bible.

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