

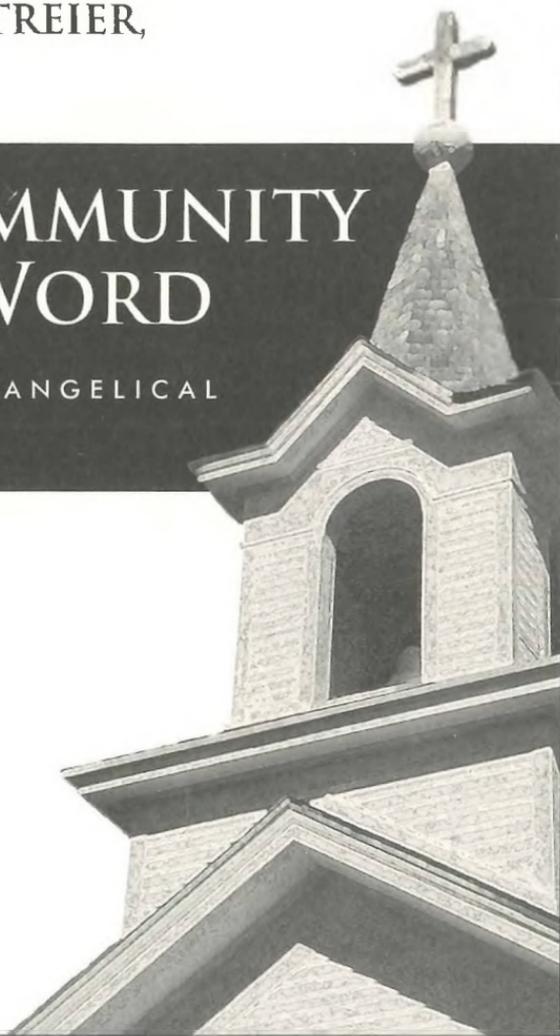
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BEYOND THEOCRACY AND INDIVIDUALISM

The Significance of John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology for Evangelicalism

CRAIG A. CARTER

Contemporary evangelicalism is often viewed as lacking an adequate ecclesiology. Critics from Catholic and Anglican traditions look suspiciously at the lack of accountability, carelessness about church order and the proliferation of new movements and offshoots of existing ones. They see no mechanism for safeguarding orthodoxy and no consciousness of standing in a specific tradition going back to the apostles. The growing array of evangelical denominations, independent churches and parachurch organizations is seen as giving late-capitalist consumer culture what it wants: designer religion. Individuals are free to pick and choose the elements of piety, doctrines, practices, rituals, level of involvement and ethical positions they want and discard the rest. The constantly evolving ethos of evangelical churches follows consumer trends in music and lifestyles. Participation is voluntary in the sense of being a matter of trivial preferences of autonomous individuals driven by nothing more than the satisfaction of felt needs. Over the past thirty years, many evangelicals, having come into contact with these criticisms of evangelicalism, have responded by taking the trail to Canterbury, or even on to Rome or Constantinople, in order to find a more adequate ecclesiology.¹

According to Robert Webber, many evangelicals are attracted to the liturgical church because they are seeking a form of worship in which mystery has a

¹See Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985).

place,² they appreciate the emphasis on sacramental reality,³ they find Anglican worship to be more God-centered, Christ-centered and Scripture-centered,⁴ and they desire a more holistic spirituality that embraces the whole church throughout history.⁵ It is interesting to note, however, that Webber takes pains to deny that the choice to move into the Anglican tradition involves, for him, at least, any negative judgment on the evangelical tradition. Webber presents the Anglican option merely as a choice that is right for him. He says of the Baptist congregation of his parents: "I would never think of suggesting that these people become Anglican. Nor do I for one moment think my Anglican expression of the faith is a higher form of spirituality."⁶ My question is, "why not?" After all, Webber describes the Anglican tradition as the fullness of the faith and evangelicalism as lacking extremely important aspects of ecclesiology. Yet his plea, in this book, seems to amount to "Please don't write me off and I promise I won't write you off." My difficulty with this approach is that it can easily be interpreted as merely extending the cafeteria menu to include the liturgical option, rather than as a radical challenge to modern individualism.

Late capitalist liberal democracy fosters individualism through consumerism, mass media, geographical mobility, high divorce rates and the breakdown of all intermediate social structures, including the family. The cult of therapy often functions to relieve guilt feelings in people who choose to put themselves and their own immediate happiness before fulfillment of their social duties. The resulting individualism makes the formation of countercultural, Christian communities extremely difficult. In the absence of determined moral and cultural resistance, Christians tend to be conformed to the world around them. The only real authority structure left in late modernity is the state. Individualism, therefore, comports well with theocracy in that there is a symbiosis between the autonomous individual and the state, which serves as the guardian of individual rights. In the absence of strong church communities that could serve as institutions of primary allegiance for Christians, Western Christians tend to identify their welfare with the nation-state that makes the pursuit of self-fulfillment possible. As Westerners (who happen also to be Christians), most evangelicals tend toward theocracy, even if that only means defending "Western values." So, ironically, modern Western individualism turns out to be closely linked with theocracy. Patriotic Christians are willing to die defending Western values, which

²Ibid., pp. 21-30.

³Ibid., pp. 43-56.

⁴Ibid., p. 41.

⁵Ibid., pp. 67-85.

⁶Ibid., p. 17

they are incapable of distinguishing from Christian ones. The theocratic impulse animating evangelicals (and liberals, it must be said, as well) is not one in which the gospel is seriously being proposed as the basis for the whole of society; rather, it is one in which Christians conform their faith to the ideologies of late capitalist, liberal democratic nation states.

The acids of modern autonomous individualism have corroded Christian communities all over the Western world including Roman Catholic, Anglican and Magisterial Reformation traditions, as well as evangelical and free church traditions. Today in North America, the churches with liturgies and organs, collars and bishops, incense and prayer books may have a superficial appearance of being countercultural, but in reality many of these denominations are even further down the road toward consumer religion than free churches. The Anglican bishop of Vancouver recently has precipitated schism in order to implement his liberal beliefs within his diocese. In the interests of pandering to every individual's sexual preference, the church in this case has sought to be "inclusive" to the point of abandoning biblical morality. I would suggest that such churches have bought into the mentality of consumer religion every bit as much as the TV evangelists; they just offer a less vulgar (although still sentimentalized) product. If American evangelicals think of America as their church, Canadian Anglicans are committed to conforming to the secular political culture, which exalts the rights of autonomous individuals to self-fulfillment as the highest good. Evangelicals as well as nonevangelicals, and proponents of both low and high ecclesiologies alike, struggle with conformity to the world in the form of excessive, community-dissolving individualism and the theocratic temptation, which often accompanies it.

Given the reality of our present cultural situation, I have trouble seeing Webber's commendation of the Episcopal alternative as a solution to the problem of the church being conformed to the modern world of late-capitalist consumerism. Bruce Hindmarsh, in a recent paper, gets to the root of commitment to the consumer mentality when he argues,

Early modern evangelicalism displayed an unprecedented . . . ecclesial consciousness that was characterized by an unparalleled subordination of church order to evangelical piety. The principle of unity among evangelicals was not typically spoken of as sacramental, nor did it have to do with authorized orders, forms or rites; the principle by which unity was discerned was evangelical piety itself.⁷

⁷Bruce Hindmarsh, "Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective," in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 15.

When evangelical piety replaces the Word of God, mediated through preaching and sacraments, as what makes the church the church, then we have a serious problem. I grant that it is in some ways preferable that this piety should take the Christ-centered, evangelical form, as opposed to a generic human experience of the divine, which is often viewed by liberal Protestantism as the essence of faith. But no personal or generic human experience of Jesus Christ can ever adequately replace the living Lord Jesus Christ himself, mediated through preaching and sacraments, as the ground of unity in the church. When individual piety constitutes the basis of ecclesial unity, the individual is prior to the church in such a way that a cafeteria-style approach to Christianity is inevitable.

The excessive individualism of contemporary evangelicalism is also behind the tendency of evangelicals to embrace theocracy. What is intriguing about the rise of conservative Christian political action since the 1970s is how such an individualistic movement as evangelicalism could mount cohesive political action. But this anomaly disappears once one realizes that, for many American Christians, whether conservative or liberal, America functions as the church. Theocracy comes easily to those who believe that America is the city set on a hill, the successor to biblical Israel, and the means through which God is working to bring freedom to the world. From Walter Rauschenbush to Reinhold Niebuhr to Jerry Falwell, the basic view of America is the same; the differences are over what is wrong with America and how to fix it. That America should be the focus is not in dispute. Evangelicals will be susceptible to this kind of inadequate ecclesiology until they begin to take the church more seriously than the nation-state as their primary source of identity.

Given this background, I would like to suggest that evangelicals need to consider John Howard Yoder's ecclesiology for two reasons. First, he views individualism as a serious problem and counters it by making ecclesiology prior to individual piety. He offers an ecclesiology parallel to the traditional Roman Catholic position that there is no salvation outside the church insofar as he understands the church to be the embodiment of salvation. This poses a challenge to modern individualism at a far deeper level than merely advocating the liturgical church as one among several options. Secondly, Yoder also rejects theocracy and maintains a clear church-world distinction. His ecclesiology is able to move beyond individualism and theocracy because of his vision of the church as a covenanted community that bears witness to the triune God, who reveals himself decisively in Jesus Christ, and who is at work to redeem his whole creation.

YODER'S THREEFOLD TYPOLOGY OF ECCLESIOLOGY

In his article "A People in the World"⁸ Yoder attempts to clarify the nature of what he calls the "believers' church vision." To do so, he uses a threefold typology, which analyzes three ecclesiological alternatives to Lutheranism in mid-sixteenth century central Europe.

First, Yoder points to those who seek to implement "the logic of theocratic humanism that Zwingli had borrowed from Erasmus, whereby the word of God, as spoken by the 'prophet' to the whole society brings about the renewing of that society according to the will of God."⁹ This is the path of Zwingli himself, as well as the Reformed churches in Geneva, Heidelberg, the Netherlands and Scotland. It feeds into evangelicalism through Puritanism. In this vision, the renewal of church and society go hand in hand. Whether the church functions as an administrative department of the state, as with Bullinger or Erastus, or whether it is distinct as with Calvin and Knox, the same goal is in view: to ensure that the whole of society is ruled by those who take their cue from Scripture so that God may be glorified. In this approach, the locus of historical meaning is found in the movement of the whole of society as guided by the church. Yoder calls this type the "theocratic vision."¹⁰

Second, Yoder points to the spiritualizers, exemplified by Casper Schwenkfeld. They claimed to carry to its logical conclusion "the dismantling of externals and the search for the true inwardness of faith alone."¹¹ This emphasis has been part of Christianity in all centuries and feeds into evangelicalism through pietism and revivalism. Very often, as Yoder points out, those in this tradition contribute to social structures and do many good works, even while emphasizing that outward forms are insufficient without deep inward reality.¹² For this tradition, the locus of meaning shifts from society as a whole to the inner life of the individual.

Third, Yoder points to Anabaptism, as exemplified by Michael Stattler and Pilgrim Marpeck. Anabaptism was claiming to carry to its logical conclusion the restoration of original Christianity. The original Anabaptists in Zurich were colleagues of Zwingli's who wanted to press further with reforms, which both they and Zwingli believed to be biblical. Eventually they broke with Zwingli because of his reluctance to risk losing the support of the city council

⁸John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 65-101.

⁹Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 71.

¹¹Ibid., p. 70.

¹²Ibid., p. 72.

by implementing too radical a reform program. The Anabaptists evangelized vigorously and established house churches in an ever-widening territory. They eventually developed into several families of denominations, including the Mennonites and the Hutterites.

As Yoder points out, it is interesting to note that each of these three types regarded the other two as having the same problem. From Zwingli's perspective, both the spiritualizers and the Anabaptists undermined Christian government. From Schwenkfeld's perspective, both the magisterial Reformers and the Anabaptists alike were too preoccupied with outward forms such as sacraments, ordination, church order, etc. From the Anabaptist perspective, both Zwingli and the spiritualizers denied the importance of proper church order. Schwenkfeld did not bother to challenge such things as the Mass or infant baptism because, for him, only spiritual reality mattered anyway. Zwingli could continue to let the Mass be celebrated long after he had come to the conclusion that it is theologically wrong because the true church is invisible and, therefore, the visible (imperfect) church can be reformed at whatever speed is compatible with the maintenance of public order. Yoder comments: "Thus both Schwenkfeld and Zwingli, in the name of a deeper spirituality, withstood the Anabaptist's call to bring into being a visible congregation of committed believers."¹³

Yoder's major ecclesiological thesis is that "the church is called to move beyond the oscillation between the theocratic and the spiritualist patterns, not to a compromise between the two or to a synthesis claiming like Hegel to 'assume' then both, but to what is genuinely a third option."¹⁴ It is important to note at this point how his threefold typology allows us to see the believers' church type as something more than a vehicle for individualism and pietism.

The theocratic vision derives from the union of the Christian church and the Roman Empire, which took place during the third to fifth centuries after Christ. After the fateful separation of church and synagogue in the second century, the church grew to include perhaps ten percent of the population of the Roman Empire and increasingly distanced itself from its Jewish roots. In the final decade of the third century the last great wave of persecution occurred. In A.D. 313, Constantine's Edict of Milan extended toleration to Christianity and provided for the return of confiscated Christian property. Around A.D. 390 Emperor Theodosius closed the pagan temples and legally entrenched Christianity as the religion of the Empire. In A.D. 420 Augustine used the armed

¹³Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 73.

might of Rome to help suppress the Donatists and the first persecution of Christians by Christians occurred. In A.D. 436 non-Christians were excluded from the army and a two-century long process was virtually complete; Christendom was born. For Yoder, the term "Constantinianism" does not merely refer to the actions of the historical man Constantine; it is actually a heresy named for a particular historical figure like Arianism or Pelagianism. Constantinianism is an ecclesiological heresy insofar as it erases the distinction between the church and the world, since the whole of society is now baptized. By failing to grant the world the freedom of unbelief, Constantinianism is inherently coercive. It is an eschatological heresy insofar as it erases the distinction between the current age and the kingdom of God by viewing this age in triumphalistic terms. But the tension created by pulling the kingdom back into history, ends up being resolved by means of a Platonic dualism in which the visible church is the mixed church of the wheat and the tares, while the true church is invisible. Yoder states:

Previously Christians had known as a fact of experience that the church existed but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling over the world but had to believe against the evidence that there existed "a believing church." Thus the order of redemption was subordinated to that of preservation, and the Christian hope turned inside out.¹⁵

The Magisterial Reformers did not challenge Constantinianism in any fundamental sense. But, then again, neither did the spiritualizers. Only the Anabaptists challenged Constantinianism.

Yoder believes that we will have an adequate ecclesiology only once we have disavowed Constantinianism¹⁶ and given up the theocratic vision. This is so for two reasons. First, the renunciation of the theocratic vision is necessary if we are going to develop an ecclesiology that understands the church as the locus of meaning in history. Yoder states: "From Genesis to Apocalypse, the meaning of history had been carried by the people of God as people, as community."¹⁷ The rejection of Constantinianism is a necessary prerequisite to overcoming the problem of individualism because as long as the locus of meaning

¹⁵John Howard Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," in *Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 57.

¹⁶See his essay "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," in *Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 242-61.

¹⁷John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 138.

is society as a whole, the gathered community of believers will never be more than a dispensable aid to personal spirituality. Second, the renunciation of the theocratic vision is necessary if we are going to develop a noncoercive, disciplined community, which is ready for mission in the world. In a post-Constantinian ecclesiology, the dignity of the individual will be recognized in the fact that entrance into the church is voluntary and the tyranny of individualism will be prevented by the moral discipline of the freely covenanted community.

In order to be a sign of hope for the whole of creation, the church must be clearly distinct from the world and must be a community created by the Word of God and united by its faith in Jesus Christ. As Yoder points out, "[T]here can be no evangelistic call addressed to a person inviting him or her to enter into a new kind of fellowship and learning, if there is not such a body of persons, again distinct from the totality of society, to whom to come and from whom to learn."¹⁸ What are the characteristics or marks of such a church?

YODER AND THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

Yoder points out that the classic Reformation definition of the church as the place where the Word of God is properly preached and the sacraments are properly administered,¹⁹ describes only the "superstructure" of the church and not the gathered congregation itself. The later addition of a third criterion, proper discipline, recognizes this omission but remains on an abstract level.

Yoder points out that two major leaders of the twentieth century ecumenical movement, Willem A. Visser't Hooft and Stephen Neill, found it necessary to move well beyond the Reformation criteria. Visser't Hooft identifies three key functions of the church: witness (*martyria*), service (*diakonia*), and communion or fellowship (*koinōnia*). While these might be seen as similar to the Reformation criteria, they are broader and less likely to be limited to clerical functions. They have to do with the church as a community of people in relationship to each other because of their relationship to God, and they imply a distinction between the church and the world. Neill suggests that three more marks need to be added to the traditional Reformation marks: "fire on earth" (missionary vitality), suffering and the mobility of the pilgrim. Once again, these marks refer to the body of believers, not just to the leadership. Yoder notes that Menno Simons added four marks of the church to the two listed by Luther: holy living, brotherly love, unreserved testimony and suffering.²⁰ Yo-

¹⁸Yoder, "A People in the World," p. 75.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²⁰Ibid., p. 77.

der expounds these marks and in so doing paints a picture of the believers' church ecclesiology he is advocating.

The church that is characterized by these marks will be one that is effective in its mission, says Yoder. But if these marks do not characterize the church, the mission will be compromised. Since these marks are incompatible with the Christendom situation and the Constantinian union of church and state, only a post-Constantinian ecclesiology will enable the church to carry out its evangelistic mission effectively.

In contrast to Yoder's believers' church ecclesiology stand two options, which define the spectrum for many Christians today. There is the "liberal" stance of the World Council of Churches in which the locus of meaning is the world as a whole. When Yoder wrote the essay "A People in the World" in the 1960s, the then-current slogans were "go where the action is" and "the secular city." We can easily update them to "the preferential option for the poor" and "eco-feminism," and note that the basic approach has not changed. The course of world history is where God is at work and the calling of the church is to try to catch up. On the other hand, there is the evangelical stance. There the locus of meaning is the individual soul. The success of the Christian mission is defined by the number of converted individuals who put their trust in Christ for what happens after death. Yoder argues that the predominant purpose of God, according to Scripture, is not to direct all of world history coercively to a certain end and it is not to make certain individuals whole, but it is to create a new covenant people which responds freely to God's call.²¹ For Yoder,

The political novelty that God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel or only a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission.²²

The believers' church ecclesiology is not a synthesis of the spiritualist and theocratic approaches. It is a genuinely third way, a unique ecclesiology. On the one hand, the church becomes the way of salvation. Yet, on the other hand, the primacy of the individual's free response to the preaching of the gospel is maintained.

For Yoder, the church does not have a "message" that is detachable from the

²¹Ibid., p. 91.

²²Ibid.

congregation of believers united in faith because the gospel is not about isolated individuals, but rather about a witnessing community. God is not a solitary, unitary being, but rather a Trinity of persons relating to each other in love. Yoder's ecclesiology is trinitarian in the sense that only a loving community of disciples can bear an adequate witness to the Trinity. Individual hero-preachers cannot do it; only the congregation as a whole can do it. But can Yoder specify in more detail what it means for a community to be a Christian community? He can, and he does so by means of his description of the practices of the Christian community in a little book called *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*.²³

PRACTICING CHRISTIANITY: YODER'S DESCRIPTION OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

In this book, Yoder explicates the social-ethical meaning of certain social practices, which characterize the people of God. His focus is on binding and loosening, breaking bread together, baptism, the fullness of Christ (or charismatic body ministry), and the rule of Paul (or congregational dialogue as the means of decision making). He chooses, not without some hesitation, to retain the term *sacrament* to describe these practices.²⁴ The term is problematic for Yoder in two ways. First, it has certain superstitious and mechanical connotations, which have caused Baptists and Churches of Christ to substitute for it the term *ordinance*. Second, the term *sacrament* could be taken to mean an action done in the sacred sphere of worship that has no social or ethical meaning. Yoder is sensitive to the concerns about magic and cult and he wants to interpret these practices as social processes, not merely religious acts. Yet, he decides to retain the term *sacrament*. Why? The answer is intriguing. He says that these practices fit the traditional definition of sacraments in that they are events in which human action and divine action coincide.²⁵

However, Yoder fundamentally challenges the traditional understanding of the category of sacrament by stretching its meaning in two ways. First, Yoder stretches the meaning from a ritual act done by the clergy to a social process enacted by the congregation as a whole. The five practices he discusses are practices of the congregation, not restricted to an ordained elite. Second, Yoder claims that these practices have meanings beyond the congregation for the

²³John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992).

²⁴Yoder, *Body Politics*, p. 1.

²⁵It is clear, however, that he would reject any theory of the sacraments that places them under the control of the church. Yoder believes that God acts through the sacraments sovereignly.

world. As Yoder sees it, liberating the control of the sacraments from the clergy and viewing them as practices of the people of God as a whole is the first step toward understanding their social-ethical relevance to the world as a whole.

For example, he discusses the economic implications of the breaking of bread and concludes that, when Jesus said, "When you do this, do it in my memory," he meant, "whenever you have your common meal."²⁶ Jesus was not calling his followers simply to perform a certain religious ritual in worship. That would perpetuate the religion/politics split that we often take for granted, but which Jesus, the Jewish prophet, could never have imagined. Rather, he intended that his disciples should live as a family in which those who are in need are cared for and supported by the community. We read in the Gospels that those who followed Jesus constituted a new social movement in which people left home, families and jobs to live communally. In Acts, the early church in Jerusalem practiced economic sharing. Connecting these two radical social movements were the resurrection appearances of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, nearly all of which focused on meals.

Is Yoder's account of social practices a "high church" or a "low church" account? It is hard to say. Consider binding and loosing. Jesus mandated the practice: "If your brother or sister sins, go and reprove that person when the two of you are alone. If he or she listens, you have won your brother or sister" (Mt 18:15). Also, God promises to be acting "in, with and under" this human activity so that "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven" (Mt 18:18).²⁷ This, Yoder points out, is the language used by the Reformers to describe sacraments. Yoder wants us to understand the meaning of "binding and loosing" (which has also been known by Protestants as "church discipline" and by Roman Catholics as "the sacrament of penance") to be a sacrament. But he interprets "binding and loosing" as something done by members of the congregation to one another, not as an action that can only be done by an ordained minister. In some ways this is both a "high" and a "low" account of the sacraments.

The goal of binding and loosing is to deal with moral issues in such a way as to restore harmony and peace within the fellowship. The intention is to restore, not to punish and to serve the offender's well being by restoring him or her to the community.²⁸ Of course, this process is open to abuse, but Yoder argues that the worst abuses arise when membership in the Christian community is not voluntary, that is, when it is not a community to whose standards

²⁶Yoder, *Body Politics*, p. 16.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 3.

and practices the members have committed themselves by means of a personal and free act.

The process of dialogue is viewed by Yoder as a means by which the community sometimes discovers the inadequacy of some of its rules. It involves a genuine effort to discern the true nature of the offense and to understand it in its fullest context. The possibility of progress in moral understanding through dialogue is assumed.²⁹ The concern is not for the reputation of the church or the upholding of abstract rules, but the wellbeing of the community, the quality of *koinonia*. The assumption is that conflict is socially useful because by dealing with it, we grow in our relationships to each other.³⁰ Conflict resolution, which today is becoming a major tool of resolving major social and ethnic strife on a global scale, and various forms of victim-offender reconciliation programs, are extensions of this basic practice of binding and loosing. Yoder concludes:

To be human is to be in conflict, to offend and to be offended. To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it. When we do that we demonstrate that to process conflict is not merely a palliative strategy for tolerable survival or psychic hygiene, but a mode of truth-finding and community-building. That is true in the gospel and it is true . . . in the world.³¹

The practice of truthful reconciliation of one to another is, not only a sacrament, but also the social shape of the church's witness to the world. For Yoder, this is an example of "social ethics as gospel."³²

In discussing baptism, Yoder asserts that Christian baptism unites Jews and Gentiles into one new body, a new humanity.³³ Baptism was distorted by Constantinianism in that, after the fifth century, there was no one left to convert because the whole world had been declared Christian by imperial edict. Yoder comments: "That made baptism a celebration of birth, reinforcing in-group identity rather than a transcending of it. Then it was natural that a new theology had to be developed."³⁴ Yoder claims that what he terms a "sacramentalistic" understanding of baptism evolved, which involved the washing away of original sin mediated to the individual by a symbolic washing of water done by a priest. The breaking down of social barriers and the in-breaking of a new

²⁹Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰Ibid., p. 9.

³¹Ibid., p. 13.

³²This is the subtitle of his book *The Priestly Kingdom*.

³³Yoder, *Body Politics*, p. 30.

³⁴Ibid., p. 31.

age disappeared from view. Yet Yoder also criticizes the Zwinglian view of baptism that reduces baptism to "an acted out message, which can be equally well translated into words."³⁵ Yoder states his own view as follows:

[W]e might be able to resurrect what might be called a 'sacramental' . . . realism. In that understanding, just as we saw in an earlier chapter that breaking bread together is an economic act, so baptism is the formation of a new people whose newness and togetherness explicitly relativize prior stratifications and classification. Then we need no path, no line of argument, and no arbitrary statement . . . to get from there to inter-ethnic equality and reconciliation, either in the church or beyond.³⁶

Yoder builds on this understanding of baptism to elucidate the mission of the church in contrast to evangelical and liberal understandings. For evangelicals, the mission of the church is usually defined as being to provide individuals, one at a time, with certain information and appeal to them to decide in favor of Jesus, a decision that is viewed as making the individual into a born-again believer. The church is understood to be a vehicle for supporting the mission and as a good method for nurturing the faith of the converted individuals. For liberals, mission is not the communication of one specific message, but rather, all kinds of involvement in the world that advances what God wants for the world. The church is called to discern movements of liberation and empowerment and to align itself with them. A third view of mission is that of the church growth movement. This approach sees the goal as the planting of viable congregations in every culture. So far, so good. But this movement tends to buy into the "homogeneous unit principle" and accept ethnic isolation and defensiveness if that will allow these congregations to grow faster. Most Christian missionary activity today operates on the basis of one of these three models.

It should be obvious, however, that Yoder's view of baptism means that the mission of the church cannot be reduced to any of these three models. For Yoder, the mission of the church and the social form of the church are the same thing and both are shaped by the community-creating, barrier-shattering practice of baptism. Yoder comments:

The message of the church is that Christ has begun a new phase of world history. The primary characterization of that newness is that now within history there is a group of people whom it is not exaggerating to call a "new world" or a "new

³⁵Ibid., p. 33.

³⁶Ibid.

humanity." We know the new world has come because its formation breaches the previously followed boundaries that had been fixed by the orders of creation and providence.³⁷

Egalitarianism has been promoted in the modern world by non-Christian social and intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment. But that happened, tragically, because the mainline Christian understanding of such matters pointed in the opposite direction. Yoder says: "Christian authorities claimed on the grounds of creation and providence that peoples, nations, and classes should stay apart, that men should rule over women, and that Europeans should rule the globe."³⁸ So it was left to the Enlightenment to champion the case for human equality. But, Yoder contends, "the New Testament has its own grounds for its own egalitarian witness, differently shaped from that of the Enlightenment, older and more deeply rooted, even though it has been lost and betrayed for centuries."³⁹

The practice of what Yoder calls "the fullness of Christ" is based on Ephesians 4:11-13, in which Paul speaks of "a new mode of group relationships, in which every member of a body has a distinctly identifiable, divinely validated and empowered role."⁴⁰ In contrast to the near-universal tendency of the human race to single out the religious professional, who has direct contact with the divine and mediates it to the group, the New Testament makes ministry a function of the every member of the body. This Pauline vision, Yoder contends, has yet to be "consciously and consistently lived out."⁴¹ He speaks of it as "the Reformation that has yet to happen."⁴² Although elements of lay ministry have been present in many different renewal movements in church history, this vision of the congregation ministering to one another on the basis of gifts of the Spirit has yet to enliven the church as a whole. For Yoder, the ministry of all to all is really the ministry of the risen Lord Jesus working through the Holy Spirit.

The final practice discussed by Yoder is that of the rule of Paul, as found in 1 Corinthians 14.⁴³ There Paul tells his readers that the way the church should conduct its affairs is by means of congregational meetings in which everyone who is prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak, should be allowed to do so. The members of the church are to "weigh" what each person says and the body

³⁷Ibid., p. 37.

³⁸Ibid., p. 40.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 47.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 57.

⁴²Ibid., p. 59.

⁴³For what follows, see *Body Politics*, pp. 61-70.

should move toward a unified judgment on the issue. Consensus is the goal. Acts 15 is an example of this process in action. The ecumenical councils of the early church arose out of this tradition. This vision has obvious implications for democracy and it is rooted in the conviction that the living Lord Jesus Christ is truly present in the meeting of believers and can guide and lead the congregation into unity if the congregation seeks him wholeheartedly.

CONCLUSION

The church practices discussed by Yoder embody the mission of the church to be "the new world on the way." As sacraments, they are events in which divine and human action coincide. It is not too much, therefore, to say that they form the shape of God's action in the world. God, by his Word, calls the church out of the world and forms it into the body of Jesus Christ as a witness to his grace. For Yoder, the spiritualist approach of adding personal depth and authenticity to the theocratic management of society does not add up to an adequate ecclesiology. Only the believers' church vision of a covenanted fellowship of believers in Jesus, who freely accept the discipline of discipleship, embodies the action of God in the world. Such a congregation will be characterized by holy living, brotherly love, unreserved testimony and suffering. Such a people, in order to carry out the essential mission of the church to be a witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, need not be perfect. It only need be visible and its very flaws will constitute an essential part of its witness, for it is a community of forgiveness, reconciliation and love, rather than a moral and spiritual elite attempting to rule over others. For this reason the gospel call to enter the church can be heard by those outside as truly good news.

Evangelicals need to grasp Yoder's point about the centrality of the visible, local church to God's redemptive work. We need to grasp the essential unity of the nature and mission of the church and the indispensability of the church for the preaching of the gospel. The gospel we preach is only a pale shadow of the New Testament message so long as it consists only of a call for individuals to do something inwardly or to take responsibility for managing society. To be the body of Christ is our calling and it is a high calling indeed.⁴⁴

⁴⁴I would like to thank my colleague at Tyndale Seminary, Dr. Jeffrey Greenman, for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.