On Being Christian- The Yoder and Hauerwas Project

Evangelical Advocacy: A Response to Global Poverty

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Being Christian:
A Summary of the Yoder/Hauerwas Theological Project

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What does it mean to be Christian? This remains the central question for theologian John Howard Yoder, the beloved Mennonite theologian known worldwide for his engagement in social ethics and ecumenism, his commitment to the centrality of Scripture, his historical genius in interpreting the Mennonite faith from the 16th century for a meaningful contemporary approach, and his commitment to pacifism. An avid league of followers have continued to journey with Yoder to ask, how do we live life first and foremost as Christians, and what does the community of Christ-followers look like politically as the manifestation of the witness of Christ’s reign in this world? None so famous as Stanley Hauerwas have continued this dialogue. The following paper purposes to summarize the theological project which continues to take shape in modern theological conversation from the writings and teachings of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

**Christian is disciple, first.**

John Howard Yoder excels at keeping first things first and reminding his readers that being Christian, obedience to Scripture, and the *Reign of Christ* must be fixed centers of every believer’s framework. When these cornerstones to the Christian identity become confused with a political alignment, cause, citizenship to a nation-state, or any other agenda, Yoder argues that Christians have become something other than Christian.

Author Mark Thiessen Nation in his essay “Yoder’s Pacifism of the Messianic Community” presents Yoder’s conviction that his central passion is not, in fact pacifism, but in the centrality of Jesus in ethics and theology. As one reads the New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation, and retrospectively, the Old Testament, the careful reader can see that the call of

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1 Mark Thiessen Nation, “Yoder’s Pacifism of the Messianic Community: A Brief Exposition of His Theology as It Relates to His Pacifism,” 18.
God sounds a serious call to discipleship, committing to Christian community, and living community as a witness to the world. Jesus must remain normative for the way Christians shape their lives. This emerges as Yoder’s central and driving passion.

For Stanley Hauerwas, ethics must integrate into theology. If we say Jesus is Lord, there comes with such a claim moral, ethical implications. For both Yoder and Hauerwas, the venue of this ethic is the Church. Hauerwas writes about the people of God, “It is very public, very political, very social in that it depicts the public form by which the colony shall witness to the world that God really is busy redeeming humanity, reconciling the world to himself in Christ. All Christian ethical issues are therefore social, political, communal issues.”

Saying that we are embodied, means that our bodies, our physical and present lives are good and important. Saying that we are fallen says that now our world is affected by sin. Being made new in Christ means we are witnesses to what God has and is doing in Christ. All of these have moral implications. Theology and ethics are completely integrated. Hauerwas argues that ethics have become informed by social sciences, but the Church’s lens must be theological. In Debra Dean Murphy’s essay interacting with the work of Hauerwas, she explains that many paradigms, particularly those sociological, deny that theology can be a worldview and exist “to keep theology at the margins, to position the ‘religious’ in the realm of the ‘private,’ to construct a model in which behind the ‘theological’ is something more real called the social.” But Hauerwas emphasizes that theology is determinative. The Christian paradigm does not deny social science but insists nonetheless that the believers’ interpretive lenses should primarily be shaped by Christian

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4 Debra Dean Murphy, “Community, Character, and Gender: Women and the work of Stanley Hauerwas,” (Vol. 55, no. 3: 2002), 346-347.
understanding. For Hauerwas, much of this comes from his emphasis on the unifying narrative which subsumes every individual story. 5

Through Yoder’s The Politics of Jesus many Christians came face to face with the implications of the gospel message which prioritize peace, social justice, and a social conscience. Yoder’s theological project makes it mandatory that Christianity is more than just “saving souls.” Yoder is fundamentally saying that a primitive salvific understanding of simply giving people tickets into heaven. According to Yoder, this Messianic community, this transformed way of living is about what it means to be Christian. We worship a particular God, One who has centrally revealed Godself through Jesus Christ, and followers, therefore, must be re-made into Jesus’ character. Believers care about the poor, not because they are Democrats, but because they are Christians, who necessarily care about the poor and care about how they use their money because these are concrete ways to love God and follow the way of the Messiah.

Hauerwas writes in his book Resident Aliens, “Right living is more the challenge than right thinking. The challenge is not he intellectual one but the political one—the creation of a new people who have aligned themselves with the seismic shift that has occurred in the world since Christ.”6

Yoder and Hauerwas teach a distinction between Church and world. Both are visible entities, but the identity of the Church cannot be confused with any single nation-state. In what Rodney Clapp calls Contantinian Christianity, 7 one’s religious convictions become swallowed in one’s citizenship or ethnicity. Such distorted blending of Church and world begs the question, who then is meaningfully Christian? Whether or not you are distinctly separate depends on your

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5 Murphy, 349.
neighbors. Christians are to be a certain species, specific, distinct then on many issues. The Church does not seek to be distinct, but seeks to be Christian.

Being a disciple of Christ and, therefore, distinct from the world does not give license to believers to neglect their duties to social engagement, but rather assumes that by definition of being the Church believers shall show the world the Reign of Christ in their midst in all of its facets. The Church by definition is *polis*, therefore the People of God are a social and political entity bearing social witness to the world. Yoder does not mean by emphasizing the otherness or set-apartness of the Church that the Body assume a laissez-faire approach to the world outside the Church. On the contrary, he suggests that the by embodying discipleship, the Church will suggest changes to society through its lifestyle, demonstrate the morals of Christ by both teaching them to their children and living them in witness of their communities, and also create social projects out of love and obedience which will serve the society around them and create a standard which the world will want to emulate.⁸

**Christian is peacemaker**

Hauerwas wrote an essay entitled, “Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church” where he gently but biblically approaches the Yoder/Hauerwas approach to confrontation and conflict transformation as an activity of the Church in making peace in the world. He introduces the call of Christ on the community of believers to use humble confrontation and nonviolent peacemaking to handle conflict openly as a model for the world and as a method to keep the church at peace with one another.⁹ Yoder shies away from using the word social “responsibility” as the definition has developed to “signif[y] a commitment to consider the survival, the interest, or the power of one’s own nation, state, or class as taking priority over the survival, interest or

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power of other persons or groups, of all of humanity, of the “enemy”, or of the church.”

Such an approach does not form cohesion with the Christian social ethic where love for one’s neighbor and one’s enemy remains the mandate from Christ Himself. However, Yoder does not, in avoiding the dangerous dichotomous language of responsibility deserve the title *socially irresponsible*, though critics may prefer in their black and white categories to slap on such a label. Both J. Lawrence Burkholder and Rodney Sawatsky claim that Yoder encourages “the virtue of irresponsibility.”

The contemporary Mennonite context of embodied Christianity and Yoder’s particular emphasis on the historical-social-political nature of Christ and the Christian story demands a closer look. Yoder does in fact reject the classic norms which drip with violence, self-interest, and worldly categorical imperatives, not because he does not believe there exists a responsibility for the Christian in social order, but because he must define that ethical norm by finding the role of the disciple of Christ in society. In the Yoder/Hauerwas theological framework, the foundation of every question remains being truly obedient to the mandates of Christ, to the values and norms of the Kingdom of God.

Dr. Theissen Nation insightfully notes that, as it relates to responsibility, Yoder consistently approaches the topic to deconstruct faulty assumptions or inconsistent ethics for the Christian who strives toward obedience to ethical instruction from the New Testament. Thus, Yoder rightfully receives criticism for neglecting to articulate any coherent doctrine of social responsibility. This remains problematic for the critic of the Yoder/Hauerwas approach. In Yoder’s earnestness and relentlessness to create a dichotomy between church and world, the ethical implications beg the question, how, where and when then is it appropriate for the Christian to take interest, action and responsibility in the larger society both in repentance for

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11 Ibid., 152.
12 Ibid., 154.
social and structural sin and for reform? The critic wonders does this approach hint at an elitism of the Christian Church, does it imply a preoccupation with those “in” to the detriment of those “out,” and does this approach truly as it claims, flesh out the Christian ethical concern for neighbor? Without offering an alternative doctrine of social responsibility, Yoder remains vulnerable to being labeled irresponsible and leaves his readers wanting to know not just what an obedient Christian ought to reject, but what she ought to embrace. In fairness, the standard of Christ raised the bar closer to God’s ideal from the Law. The Messiah redefined certain aspects of the Law saying, “You have heard it said…but I say to you…” Thus, Jesus aimed at leading His disciples closer to the heart of God in their lifestyles and actions. Like Christ, Yoder does not lower the bar to the former order of a list of commands, but instead leaves the disciple with the straightforward, ambiguous but Biblical reference: take up your cross and follow Me.

**Christian as Pacifist.**

Perhaps most famously, both John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas hold unswervingly to a belief in pacifism and nonviolence. Their theological project teaches that Christ’s model and His design for the Messianic Community creates a People which may, even most likely will, suffer violence like He at the hands of enemies but will hold fast to the unconditional love of God for humanity caring for neighbor, even at the expense of self. Yoder’s emphasis on the centrality of Jesus as demonstrated to this point motivates his belief in Christian pacifism. As Jesus embodied God in flesh and reveals to humanity the “nature and will of God,” Jesus’ demonstrates the crux of the gospel in laying down His own life for another. Christ’s sacrificial lifestyle and His radical subversion defines Christian ethics and points to the model for living the way of the Reign of God, which is nonviolent. In *Nevertheless* Yoder

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13 Nation, “Yoder’s Pacifism of the Messianic Community,” 3.
writes, “therefore, in the person and work of Jesus, in his teachings and his passion, this kind of pacifism finds its rootage, and in his resurrection it finds its enablement.”

**Christian is ecumenical and catholic.**

Yoder teaches followers of Christ that the Bible demands unity in the Body. He suggests that maintaining familial relations with all who confess Christ as Lord is the duty of the Christian. But such unity does not remain abstract and theoretical in the Yoder/Hauerwas approach. The contemporary Mennonite approach calls for unity among Christians to manifest in a call to faithfulness and discipline in every sphere of life from politics and social ethics to discipline and biblical teaching.

Believers are united by each unique stories being encapsulated by a larger narrative: the ongoing redemptive history of God in the world. This recognition of the differences and diversity of the People of God with an unequivocal commitment to simultaneous Christian unity marks the Yoder/Hauerwas theological project. Yoder’s life of ecumenical conversation and his, likewise irrevocable rejection of pluralism demonstrates this juxtaposition of imperative unity with uncompromising commitment to the gospel of Christ. Yoder models the humility necessary for such a juncture and teaches principles of conflict transformation. Yoder’s teaching demonstrates the authenticity and necessity of this unapologetic theological approach. Miroslav Volf reminds readers that “Jesus was no prophet of ‘inclusion’ for whom the chief virtue was acceptance and the cardinal vice intolerance. Instead, he was the bringer of ‘grace,’ who not only scandalously included ‘anyone’ in the fellowship of ‘open commensality,’ but made the ‘intolerant’ demand of repentance and the ‘condescending’ offer of forgiveness.”

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In conclusion, both John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas have created a theological project whose emphasis centers around the question: How do I be Christian? This approach weaves together serious discipleship, Christian ethics, peacemaking and conflict resolution, nonviolence, and ecumenism. The unifying force behind their very different styles and articulations remains their unswerving commitment to the centrality of Jesus, their foundational use of the Bible, their love of the Church and her tradition, and their belief in pacifism as a Christian ethic. Nation writes, “It is from the Church—even if with some struggle—that our first language regarding peace and justice is derived. This quite naturally follows from the confessions of faith we make when we are in church, the very language of our faith itself.”17 John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas sound a call to followers of Christ to be true to their first language of faith while eloquently, intelligently, and strikingly translating the message to the dialect of the world as a witness to the Reign of God.

17 Mark Thiessen Nation, Faithfulness and Fortitude, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2000),102.