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Pacifism as a Way of Knowing

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Among the best-known claims made by John Howard Yoder is that "people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe."[1] This statement is a confession that the self-giving, self-emptying love of Christ makes a witness to the true direction of history—the way things really work—and is thus the ground for any honest confrontation with the darkness of sin and violence that is surely part of the world we face each day.[2]

Put differently, following Jesus in discipleship even to the point of giving up life willingly rather than clutching at it possessively is not simply a hard teaching or rule of faith that Christians should heroically follow no matter how absurd it may appear in the context of a natural world full of rivalry, competition, violence, and the survival of the fittest. Yoder's claim that cross-bearing is cosmically sensible affirms that such self-offering discipleship springs rightly from what we can know to be true about the renewal of the creation that God is bringing about all around us, despite the blindness and disobedience that are also manifested. Yielding one's

1. Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," 58.

2. An earlier version of this chapter, here revised, appeared as the essay "Bearing the Cross as a Way of Knowing," *The Cresset* 74 (2010) 6–13. Used by permission.

life to God in such a way is an alignment with truth and thereby an act of freedom in both the practical and actual sense.

This chapter explores several ways in which such yieldedness to the cross-shaped grain of the universe opens our eyes and ears and lives to a renewed and truthful knowledge about the world around us that makes for peace. This renewed way of knowing is based on what we might call pacifist epistemology—perceiving the world around us from the standpoint of an assumption that the peaceable reign of God is in fact coming on earth as in heaven, and that it is coming peaceably. Stated another way, this chapter is a multi-faceted extension and development of the ideas of submission and subordination that were introduced in earlier chapters.

Cross and Resurrection

One of the most provocative statements concerning the epistemological status of the cross is found in a well-known passage from Yoder's *Politics of Jesus*. In the final chapter of the book, where Yoder is describing a nonviolent view of history and social change, he argues that patience trumps effectiveness as the criteria for Christian faithfulness. In extending this argument, Yoder makes the claim that "the relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection."[3]

What does this mean? More specifically what does it mean to identify obedience with the cross and triumph with the resurrection? What is the content of the obedience that can properly be called cross-bearing and what is the sort of triumph that can properly be called resurrection? What is the relationship between the cross and the resurrection?

Yoder's perspective on the cross displays how the cross may offer a way of seeing the entire cosmos as well as the particular events taking place around us in our own time and space according to a cruciform narrative. Such a narrative refigures suffering neither as fearfully evil nor as intrinsically redemptive, but rather as a site of meaningful and potentially redemptive struggle toward the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ.[4]

3. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 232.

4. Yoder's perspective broadens significantly the meaning of the cross beyond the rituals of sacrifice and scapegoating given prominence recently by René Girard and his disciples. In his work, Girard has emphasized the extent to which the work of Jesus on

In a well-known statement from *Politics of Jesus*, Yoder argues that "only at one point, only on one subject—but then consistently, universally—is Jesus our example: in his cross."[5] But this cross, for Yoder, is "no longer any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded," rather, "the believer's cross must be, like his Lord's, the price of his social nonconformity."[6] In this text, Yoder's intent is to distinguish between suffering in general and suffering that results from obedience. In what follows, I want to extend Yoder's argument to include obedience that may occur in the midst of any kind of suffering. Obedience would then involve the adoption of a right posture toward the suffering, a willingness to discover in that suffering that which is aligned with the direction of history and the unfolding of God's reality.[7]

One way to understand suffering, for example, is as loss: loss of stability, comfort, possession, even coherence. The story of the cross on this reading is about not needing to grasp or protect those features of our social and personal world that are generally assumed to be required for health and well-being: such as food, clothing, shelter, comfort, safety, a cell-phone with a calling plan, etc., even though these are gifts to be received with gratitude when they are available to us (except for possibly cell phones!). As Yoder puts it elsewhere quite succinctly, "if you follow the risen Jesus, *you don't have to* hate or kill. *You don't have to* defend yourself."[8] The liberation from self-possession and self-protec-

the cross exposes the scapegoating habits of societies that seek to save themselves from mimetic violence by forging a sacrificial solidarity against a victim. As he puts it, "The gospels only speak of sacrifices in order to reject them and to deny them any validity." Girard, *Things Hidden*, 180. In this view, the cross represents what Mark Heim has called the end of sacrifice—that is, the end of the persecution of innocent victims in order to preserve social order. Heim, "No More Scapegoats," 22–29. Bearing the cross would thus not be understood to mean making a sacrifice, but rather to live a life that exposes the futility of sacrifice. Much discussion of Girard focuses around the meaning of sacrifice and of the extent to which Christ's death can properly be called a sacrifice, or to have accomplished the end of sacrifice. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 30–37.

5. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 95.

6. Ibid., 96.

7. Early Anabaptist leader and writer Balthasar Hubmaier seemed to recognize such a possible connection between faithful martyrdom and faithful natural death when he described three kinds of baptism: "that of the Spirit, which takes place inwardly in faith; the second, of water, which takes place outwardly by oral affirmation of faith before the church; and the third, of blood in martyrdom or on the deathbed, of which Christ also speaks." Hubmaier, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 301.

8. Yoder, "Anabaptist Shape," 339.

tion is not, according to this view, the experience of victimhood—the forceful destruction or dispossession of human beings against their will. It is rather an experience of agency, of relinquishing willingly that which is demanded by another, of making a gift of what was demanded, thus reconstituting the object of mimetic desire as a free-will offering—an excess of resources. Thus, when on October 2, 2006, the young Amish girl Marian Fisher told the gun-wielding Charles Roberts at the Nickel Mines School to "Shoot me first," she was engaging in just such an act of impossible agency, of giving away what another sought to take, thus denying the killer ultimate control of the lives he destroyed.[9]

Furthermore, the words of Marian Fisher provide a peaceable narrative leverage not just for settings of human conflict and violence, but also for our view of the natural world. As one example, I cite my colleague Angela Montel's critique of dominant war metaphors used by cell biologists to describe the relationship between white blood cells (named natural killer cells by scientists) and the so-called invading viruses and bacteria that threaten the life of the host. Montel challenges the idea that we need to understand the struggle between white blood cells and pathogens as a war taking place within the human body.[10] She argues that such a narrative frame has motivated an approach to treatment that emphasizes ridding the body and the environment of germs that are actually helpful in strengthening the immune system. She notes, for example, the increasingly high number of cases of asthma, hay fever, and other allergies associated with germ-free environments, compared with a much lower rate in contexts such as the more polluted countries of the former Eastern Bloc, on family farms, and in child care centers. She points out how the excessive use of anti-bacterial products may be destroying a protective layer of nonpathogenic organisms on our bodies and strengthening treatment-resistant forms of harmful bacteria.[11]

Montel suggests replacing the war metaphors with images of dance and struggle in accounts of cell behavior. Emphasizing the "co-evolution of human hosts and microbial pathogens," she emphasizes the mutual dependence of hosts and pathogens and argues, following the work of Nancey Murphy, that we view the dance between microbes and their hosts as an occasion to appreciate the "sacrificial suffering through to

9. Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace*, 25–26.

10. Montel, "Violent Images," 224–25.

11. Ibid., 225.

something higher" that "binds us to all creation and to the nonviolent, suffering Redeemer himself."[12]

When we recognize that the suffering encounter with natural and social forces that seem to threaten us with death provides an opportunity to bear the cross, we are enabled to face such struggles with the knowledge that we are "threatened with resurrection," as Jim Amstutz puts it.[13] An eloquent articulation of this principle is found in the christological hymn of Philippians 2, where Christ is said to have become exalted as Lord precisely in his self-emptying obedience to death. It is to this kenotic principle that I now to turn.

Kenosis and Consumption

The christological model of submission and obedience that Yoder lifts up is the obedience of Christ even unto death in Philippians 2. The most common or traditional understanding of this text pictures Christ Jesus, who was already equal with God in the upper realm, but gave up divine attributes—that is, emptied himself—to become human, and then as a human being refused to seize what was already his, namely equality with God. Yoder suggests a different approach. As noted in chapter 1, Yoder's preferred interpretation of this text sees Jesus as a parallel to Adam. As a human being Jesus refused to seize that which was not rightfully his. In contrast to Adam, who succumbed to temptation in an effort to be like God, Yoder writes, as a human being Jesus refused any effort to seize equality with God. "Jesus did 'not consider being equal with God as a thing to be seized' (Phil 2:6). His very obedience unto death is in itself not only the sign but also the firstfruits of an authentic restored humanity." With this death, Yoder says, "we have for the first time to do with a man who is not the slave of any power, of any law or custom, community or institution, value or theory. Not even to save his own life will he let himself be made a slave of these Powers." His "authentic humanity" included accepting death from the Powers. By accepting death at their hand, and refusing to bend to their threats and coercion, Jesus exposed their weakness and defeated the Powers.[14] This obedience unto death constitutes his

12. Ibid., 233.
13. Amstutz, *Threatened with Resurrection*, 18.
14. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 145.

victory. By his obedient death, Jesus attained the role of Lord, equality with God, the attribute of deity.

In *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder explains that the perfection of Jesus "was not a timeless divine status but was *attained* through weakness with prayers and supplications, loud cries and tears." This statement makes it clear that kenosis or self-emptying properly understood is not a divestment of power but rather an exercise of power that defeats those dominating forces that otherwise threaten to define and undermine humanity. Moreover, Jesus' kenosis demonstrates that the powers are not defeated by the strategies of violence and abuse by which the powers maintain their grip over their subjects. Rather the powers are defeated by the refusal to grasp for control and domination, by the identification of believers with the Son who is "the image of the invisible creator, holding all things together, reconciling all things, head of the body."[15]

In her book *Powers and Submissions*, Sarah Coakley offers an extensive discussion of the possible meanings of kenosis that has parallels to Yoder's analysis. Coakley's account raises an important question about self-emptying that Yoder does not address. In a discussion that ranges from the biblical account itself through the church fathers to the present, Coakley points to the argument among feminist scholars about whether the injunction to empty oneself as Christ did is properly addressed to women—or for that matter to anyone whose full humanity has been stolen by force.[16]

This question of whether self-emptying is a practice of power or disempowerment is crucial. The way of the cross is easily misunderstood as an acceptance or enablement of violence and abuse. Coakley attributes the anxieties feminists have over kenosis to an assumption that Christ was giving up power that he had possessed as a member of the Trinity when he accepted Crucifixion. That is, Christ acted in a condescending way toward us, in a way that can best be identified with those in this world who have power and the willpower to give it up. This view assumes the traditional interpretation, or to use Yoder's language, that Christ is an "eternal being who gives up his eternal attributes in order to become a man."[17]

15. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 51–52.
16. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 3–25.
17. Yoder, *Preface* (2002), 84.

Both Yoder and Coakley prefer the interpretation in which Jesus attains Lordship because he refused to seize the role of God, or, as Coakley argues, self-emptying is no longer understood as what Jesus does in order to become human but rather what he does as human in order to become God. In other words, self-emptying is actually a means by which Jesus achieves divinity, and therefore an attribute of divinity, rather than a compromise or giving up of divinity.

According to Coakley, if the vulnerability associated with self-emptying is in fact an attribute of divinity, a feature or sign of divine power rather than a contradiction of the divine, then the vulnerability that women often exhibit is properly seen as a practice of power rather than an experience of victimage.[18] For example, when Marian Fisher said "Shoot me first," was she exhibiting patriarchal training in oppressive self-effacement or was she in fact taking charge of the situation by asserting agency in the face of a man's attempt to destroy her?

If we accept Coakley's argument, then Fisher's speech act can be seen as a "willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence which, far from complementing masculinism, acts as its undoing."[19] In fact, according to Coakley, if such vulnerability to enemies demonstrates our true humanity, then women's tendency not to take up the privileged role of the controlling Enlightenment "man of reason" gives women a particular and privileged location for realizing the empowerment associated with vulnerability.[20] Put differently, women's capacity for agency is no longer defined according to a masculine tendency to identify power with aggression or violence (as well as to define anything short of aggression as passivity). Rather, "vulnerable, non-grasping humanity" is now acknowledged to be aligned with "authentic divine power."[21]

Furthermore, the spiritual and practical disciplines involved in refusing to grasp or demand—what traditional Anabaptist conviction has named "gelassenheit" or yielding—are then to be seen as disciplines of empowerment, of receiving as gifts what others perhaps meant as harm. The practice of contemplative prayer, for example, should no longer be seen as a practice of passive withdrawal from the struggle of everyday life but rather the discovery of a renewed space within everyday life from

18. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 25.
19. Ibid., 37.
20. Ibid., 30.
21. Ibid., 38.

which it is possible to live in a new way amidst the ruins of the world that is passing away. Such radical contemplative prayer in the service of yielding is aligned with the practice of revolutionary subordination as described by Yoder in the ninth chapter of *The Politics of Jesus*: becoming a "free ethical agent" by voluntarily acceding to "subordination in the power of Christ instead of bowing to it either fatalistically or resentfully."[22] This is because "the new world or regime under which we live is not a simple alternative to present experience but rather a renewed way of living within the present."[23]

Because this renewed way of living is precisely not an absurd idealism amidst a tragic reality but rather a quite realistic alignment with the actual direction in which the cosmos is being renewed by God, the disciple of Jesus can yield rather than fight. Or as Yoder puts it: "it is precisely this attitude toward the structures of this world, this freedom from needing to smash them since they are about to crumble anyway, which Jesus had been the first to teach and in his suffering to concretize."[24] Radical contemplative prayer or revolutionary subordination is thus a spiritual discipline that puts the disciple into the flow of God's purposes as they are being worked out.[25]

To say this yet another way: accepting God's will means accepting the way that God works in the world—not by might or by power but by the spirit. If God does not impose God's will on God's world against the will of God's disobedient creatures, then for the disciple of Jesus to willingly accept in any given moment the painful effects of disobedient practices or structures on the disciple without trying to crush them and without accepting their ultimate sovereignty is to accept the will of God,

22. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 186. The discussion here of the admittedly controversial notion of "revolutionary subordination" supplies a somewhat different, additional nuance to the understanding of this theme, which was previously referenced in chapters 4 and 6. However, alongside these various efforts to interpret revolutionary subordination in a positive light, note the suggestion in chapter 13 to move to use "less easily misconstrued terms of reciprocity and power-sharing."

23. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 185.

24. Ibid., 187.

25. Or as Coakley argues, following the work of the early twentieth-century Benedictine writer John Chapman, rather than being seen as the passive or apathetic acceptance of "everything that happens to one," the contemplative stance "requires a positive and participative intention to will God's will for one at this moment, and to accept (just for this one moment) that whatever is befalling one is indeed God's will" (*Powers and Submissions*, 49).

without God's will being seen as the sovereign cause of the suffering caused by disobedience. It is only in this sense that it is right to understand Jesus' crucifixion as the will of God—as a way of responding to enemies even unto death that comports most fully with the way in which God intervenes in history, with the way God brings about God's purposes amidst disobedient creatures, and with the will of God for those of us who seek to pursue God's purposes in our daily lives.

For an additional clarification of what is being advocated here, recall Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech in Memphis the day before he was assassinated where he reflected on the famous confrontation with Birmingham police chief Bull Connor. In the speech he stresses the extent to which that confrontation witnessed to the tactical alignment of the civil rights movement with God's will and with the "physics" of the cosmos:

> We mean business now and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world. Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come. But we just went before the dogs, singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." . . . Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the trans-physics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses. . . . We knew water. That couldn't stop us.[26]

Arguably, the practices of nonviolence King advocated in the context of the civil rights movement illustrate an aggressive version of yieldedness—a public and visible and persistent witness against the disobedience of racist political and institutional life which endures the suffering involved in such a witness without retaliation or self-defense. To return to Yoder's helpful phrase, "revolutionary subordination," one can imagine a range of tactical emphases which improvise on such a complex posture. King's activist stance arguably privileged the revolutionary aspect while other stances might privilege the subordinate aspect.[27] Yet,

26. Quoted in Buckley, "Voice of America," 24.

27. Yoder envisioned this spectrum of responses. Recall the mentions from chapter 6 of a long citation from Johannes Hamel, which contained the comment that being subordinate could include an "extremely aggressive way of acting," and his assertion that he used "nonresistant" to mean "the suffering renunciation of retaliation in kind," but that "it does not exclude other kinds of opposition to evil." See Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 180, the continuation of note 40, and 202 n. 14.

when some measure of each emphasis is present in Christian witness—a revolutionary refusal to be defined by the fading social order and a subordinate yielding to the damaging blowback of such a refusal—then the will of God can be understood as being fulfilled. It is this sense in which Marian Fisher can be said to have known the same thing that Martin Luther King Jr., knew: neither guns nor fire hoses are effectual against the "trans-physics" of the cross.

A "Pacifist" Hermeneutics

How does a person come to see the world in this sort of a way? What is the source of strength and wisdom for managing the life of renewal amidst the corrupting and dehumanizing structures of the fading order? What concrete knowledge can infuse contemplative prayer with improvised combinations of revolutionary challenge and nonviolent subordination which flow with God's purposes?

It is clear from Yoder's writings that he believed this concrete knowledge comes from the study and practice of the Scriptures by the living body of Christ.[28] The texts of the Bible are a marvelous instantiation of the broken and renewed world that we seek to see and address rightly. Rather than function as contemporary self-help manuals, which tell us how to adjust our lives to the functional realities of the blinded world, the Scriptures empower us to align our lives with those purposes of God which challenge the disobedience of the surrounding world. This requires us to be attentive especially to those parts of the Bible that trouble us or bother us. So Yoder was also committed to a serious effort to understand the point of view from which a given biblical text was written, especially in the case of those texts that trouble us or contradict our own assumptions.[29] In what follows, I sketch briefly an approach to biblical interpretation that is consistent with the "biblical realism" advocated by Yoder, while drawing on other contemporary biblical scholars such as Walter Brueggeman and Eugene Peterson. This approach seeks to avoid imposing our own systems and demands on the text and to rather let

28. "It is a basic novelty in the discussion of hermeneutics to say that a text is best understood in a congregation." Yoder, "Hermeneutics of Anabaptists," 21.

29. "Gradually I have been taught that any interpretation of an apostle is unsound unless it springs from a personal (and necessarily subjective) comprehension of the apostle's point of standing within his own history." Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 131.

the text speak to us, a position consistent with and supportive of pacifist epistemology.

The result of this hermeneutical standpoint that is open to both the congregation and the strange perspective of the Bible is that the Scriptures make readers dysfunctional, but in a way that is humanizing, that makes us into the lovely and loving creatures God intended us to be when God created us. This humanizing dysfunctionality is precipitated in the biblical text through the discursive and performative momentum created by at least three kinds of tensions found in the Bible.

The first tension is that of generic and literary difference. Like a good library, the Bible contains texts that address a variety of different human situations and problems. As such, one finds in the Bible many contrasting methods of communication and artistic appeal. For those who want to discover who they are, the historical narratives of Israel and the church provide a background against which to live out the drama of one's own life as a member of God's people. For those who struggle with the extraordinary emotions of human experience—love, hate, delight, anger, desire, fear, and more, the Psalms provide poetry and music. For those who seek practical guidance amidst the recurring patterns of human failure, the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes offers rules for living and decision-making. For those who seek empowerment to challenge the sins of self and world, the prophetic texts offer judgment and hope. For those who seek spiritual counsel and admonition there are the pastoral epistles. For those who desire a perspective on how all of this going to turn out, there is the apocalyptical literature. The changing demands of human experience are addressed in all of these genres in concrete rather than general ways.

The second tension is one of perspective and conviction. The Hebrew Bible provides what Walter Brueggemann has called disputed testimony about the nature and purposes of God.[30] We find as we read that we have the experience of being in a jury box of the biblical courtroom, listening to competing arguments and being asked to decide which one to accept. Is the God of Israel an angry God who destroys the disobedient with water and fire or is Yahweh a God of mercy and love who refuses to revoke the covenant God has made with God's people? Should the alien be removed from the community or welcomed as a friend? Are we to pursue purity or hospitality? Should we fight for God or will God fight

30. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 82–83.

for us? These and a vast array of other disputes about God and humanity are not finally settled in the Scriptures. As James Barr has written, "the working out of the biblical model for the understanding of God was not an intellectual process so much as a personal conflict, in which men struggled with their God, and with each other about their God."[31]

Third, we discover in the biblical story changing circumstances of godly intervention and will-manifestation. At times God shows up in the earthquake and at other times through a still, small voice. In one moment, God sends plagues and in another manna. God may harden the Pharaoh's heart or God may remove the scales from the eyes of Saul. This God, in the testimony of Moses, both kills and makes alive, both wounds and heals (Deuteronomy 32:39). Perhaps most decisively, in the Christian inflection of Scripture, this God was revealed to the ancestors through the prophets, "but in these last days by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Heb 1:1–2).

It is against the backdrop of such difference, debate, and development in the Scriptures that we can find ourselves with the apocalyptic seer before the mighty angel wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, with a face like the sun, and with legs like pillars of fire—one foot planted in the sea and the other in the land—holding a scroll. We hear the voice from heaven: "Go take the scroll." We hear the angelic invitation, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth" (Rev 10:1–11).

Eugene Peterson's riff on this text emphasizes how consuming the biblical text through contemplative and prayerful reading opens up the true world of God—a world that is beyond our control, without obvious relationships between causes and effects, and full of upsetting miracles. This world—the real world—disrupts the dream world of our adolescent expectations, where everything works out on our behalf. "For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for the real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy."[32]

Indeed, the consumption of the scriptures can be seen as a kind of antidote to the sort of corrupting consumption that ravages our everyday lives amidst the empire of the market. The scroll appears before us as a kind of truth drug, like the red pill in *The Matrix* films. We are invited

31. Quoted in Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 105.

32. Ibid.

to eat it, taste its sweetness and be forewarned of the bitter feeling in our stomachs.

Such scriptural consumption is dangerous, however, and not something to try out on one's own. The proper image of scriptural consumption is not so much the private dinner but the community potluck. Swallow the text whole, but make sure you are with others who can help you out if you get too sick on your stomach. When the gathered body of Christ consumes the Word of God, taking it up in discussion and taking it in through prayer, the Word becomes enfleshed again among us. The "real world" of God becomes visible once again before the blinded world.

Eugene Peterson emphasizes how the "real world" that is available to us in the consumption of Scripture is not imposed upon us: "God's word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing. But not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer, to enter into the conversation. From beginning to end, the word of God is a dialogical word, a word that invites participation."[33] Thus, the truth we discover in the consumption of the Scriptures is a truth that can only be received rightly as a gift, as good news, and only ever offered to others in the same way.

By definition, the good news cannot be offered at the point of a sword or the barrel of a gun or the threat of a lawsuit. The good news is subject to rejection, just as we must be if we are to become its body—its agency. To become aligned with the world that God is bringing about is also to yield to both the friendly and the hostile reception of that world by the worldly audience. Or, as Yoder puts it, "readiness to bear [the audience's] hostility is part of the message."[34]

It might be objected that such an approach to scripture is inconclusive, with the potential to sideline central Christian convictions, including the teachings of Jesus himself. My assumption, an important and contestable one, is that the authority and power of the life of Jesus Christ as presented in the Scriptures does not require grounding in a unified reading of the entire Bible as a noncontradictory discourse aligned with the teachings of Jesus, although that is one conclusion that might be drawn. Certainly much of Yoder's exegetical work on the Old Testament, as it appeared in chapter 4 of *The Politics of Jesus* or *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, for example, stresses the extent to which there is more

33. Ibid., 109.

34. Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed," 52.

consistency than many Christians have been tempted to see between the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. At the same time, Yoder acknowledges that the Bible contains trajectories of conviction (i.e. royal ideology in parts of the Hebrew scriptures) that differ from the ultimate confirmation of the prophetic and exilic posture that is found in the life of Jesus Christ.[35] My account of diversity in the Bible here allows perhaps more of an unsettled tension or ongoing argument than Yoder did between, for example, the prophetic and priestly trajectories found in the Hebrew scriptures. It also assumes a not always resolved conversation in the church about how a commitment to the God revealed in Jesus Christ assists us in entering the ongoing argument about the meaning of God's will for God's people as it was revealed to the priests and prophets and poets of the Hebrew scriptures as well as to the gospel and epistle writers of the New Testament.

As was just noted, Yoder wrote that a text is best understood within the congregation as the living body of Christ. However, as John Nugent has argued, Yoder also believed that Jesus' teachings had the authority to relativize strands of the Old Testament that contradict the posture found in Jesus Christ.[36] In this light, I am more inclined than Yoder to allow contradictory exegesis to stand, at least in the short term, in the faith that the story of Jesus Christ will ultimately prevail.

My purpose in stressing the appearance of the story of Jesus Christ amidst an ongoing scriptural argument—perhaps to a greater extent than is apparent in Yoder's writings—is to highlight the way in which the story, teaching, and life of Jesus Christ makes a powerful witness to the peaceable reign of God precisely because it does not seek to suppress all that questions it. Just as following Jesus Christ in discipleship involves acting in faith rather than from necessity, so discovering the good news found in the Scriptures invites acceptance of the gospel without requiring the

35. See, for example, the chapter titled "To Serve Our God and Rule the World" in *The Royal Priesthood*, in which Yoder acknowledges that "as long as the royal house of Judah stood, the royal ideology could claim equal status in the same histories and in the psalms beside the prophetic one" (133). John Nugent has made a study of Yoder's Old Testament exegesis in which he stresses that Yoder was seeking in his interpretation to expand readers' recognition of neglected themes in the Old Testament texts that are confirmed in the life of Jesus Christ. Nugent notes that Yoder recognized rival strands within the biblical text while only granting those that are consistent with Jesus' teachings the authority to relativize those strands that contradict the posture that culminates in Jesus Christ. Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 107.

36. See note 35.

overcoming of all counterarguments, even those found in the Bible. By faith, I remain confident as a Christian that the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a truth that is "unkillable," even as it is revealed most fully in a context of contestation and even rejection.[37] Moreover, this "pacifist" way of knowing the truth of Jesus Christ is an expression of the peaceable way of Jesus Christ to which we are invited. And finally, even if a bit more open-ended, this "pacifist" way of knowing it is an extension of Yoder's comment quoted earlier in this volume that the truth of Jesus cannot keep dry above or overwhelm the sea of relativism/pluralism. Rather we seek "a way to stay within our bark, barely afloat and sometimes awash amidst those waves, yet neither dissolving into them nor being carried only where they want to push it."[38]

Remembrance, Forgiveness, and Obedience

The gospel epistemology that I have been describing here is a comprehensive experience of the world, even if it is as scandalously particular as a revelation of God in the life of a particular (temporarily divided) people—Israel and the church. There is a past, a future, and a present dimension of gospel consciousness, discovered first of all in the reading of the scriptures with other believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but then also instantiated in the way we come to see our places in the unfolding drama of God's story in our own time and place.

The memory of the past—both that of the human societies and of our own personal histories—is for the believer embedded in the story of God's people as found in the Bible. That story is one of failure, forgiveness, and faithfulness. God's people fail God and one another while God both judges and forgives their failures. In the process of owning this story of failure and forgiveness as their own, God's people in obedience extend to one another and to their neighbors the grace and forgiveness that they have received.

In *Body Politics*, Yoder shows how the memory of God's forgiveness is represented in the practice of binding and loosing within congregational life, based on following the law of Christ. The law of Christ states

37. "Die Warheit ist untödlich" is an epigram that appeared in most of Balthasar Hubmaier's works, translated by Yoder as "Truth Is Unkillable." Hubmaier, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 76–77 n. 10.

38. Yoder, "But We Do," *Priestly*, 58; Yoder, "But We Do," *Pacifist*, 34.

that we forgive others just as God forgives us, an axiom stated conditionally in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Paul's restatement of this law emphasizes our actions in response to the forgiveness we have already received from God: "just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive" (Col 3:13).[39]

Yoder stresses that God's forgiveness is concretely manifested through the binding and loosing process undertaken by God's people, a process whereby relationships are restored between offenders and offended through a combination of dialogue and discernment. In dialogue is established the truth of an offense; in discernment is discovered the route to restoration. Forgiveness is not simply a matter of dismissing or forgetting an offense, but rather a truth-seeking restoration of broken relationships in which a binding memory of an injury precedes the loosing forgiveness of an enemy.[40] As Yoder puts it: "there is an intimate link between forgiving and making ethical decisions."[41]

Yoder's point that binding is part of the process of loosing is helpfully illuminated by Miroslav Volf, who has argued that in order for the injuries of the past to be rightly remembered, the gospel call urges both an accurate recall of such injury and a readiness to forget it.[42] For example, the ability to forget is not unrelated to the severity of the injury. Some injuries are easier to forget than others and such distinctions regarding severity of injury must be part of any restoration process involving forgiveness. Put another way, suppressing memories of injury makes forgiveness impossible. One cannot forgive what one cannot recall.

At the same time, as Derrida has argued, forgiveness by definition is not simply a matter of justice or balancing right and wrong, but rather of giving away what cannot be restored. True forgiveness could only ever properly be offered in response to an unforgiveable offense. By contrast an action that is apparently forgiveable by definition can be compensated within an economy of exchange and justice—by reparation or restitution. Derrida thus distinguishes between pure forgiveness, which is impossible, and transactional forgiveness, which occurs in human history, but is only given meaning by reference to the horizon of the impossible form of forgiveness—forgiving the unforgiveable. He writes, "Sometimes,

39. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 4–5.
40. Ibid., 6–13.
41. Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace*, 122.
42. Volf, *End of Memory*, 204–5.

forgiveness (given by God, or inspired by divine prescription) must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition; sometimes it requires, as its minimal condition, the repentance and transformation of the sinner." Furthermore, he argues, "It is between these two poles, *irreconcilable but indissociable*, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken."[43]

Stated another way, the memory of God's gracious and impossible acts of forgiveness toward us provides a horizon against which it is possible to contemplate the offering of forgiveness to others—even when such forgiveness is flawed, limited, and conditional. And such a practice of both honest remembering and free forgetting is the condition of possibility for an anticipated future in which reconciled enemies make historically visible their already accomplished reconciliation in Christ. For Volf, the eucharistic body of Christ is the crucial location of such a realized future: "by remembering Christ's Passion, we remember ourselves as what we shall be—members of one communion of love, comprised of wrongdoers and the wronged."[44] Yoder frames this possibility of radical forgiveness within the context of God's excessive grace and mercy toward humanity: "We can stop loving only the lovable, lending only to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionality of the benevolence of God."[45]

The astonishing presence of Amish families at the funeral of Charles Roberts is perhaps a most eucharistic instance of such practices of memory and anticipation that are energized by God's unconditional benevolence, even though communion was not served. But in more ordinary contexts, the capacity of members of Christ's broken body—alienated from one another as they might be—to gather in right relationship around the Lord's table is indeed a practice that makes visible the cross-formed grain of the universe. And any such miraculous actions that yield one's memories to God, in the hope of the world to come, whether they take place in the sanctuary or the marketplace, are evidence of the possible obedience that right remembering and hopeful anticipation make visible.

Mennonite missionary David A. Shank tells the story of attending one of Karl Barth's seminars in the early 1950s with John Howard Yoder. Barth was discussing with students the relationship between the memory

43. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 44–45.

44. Volf, *End of Memory*, 119.

45. Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 48.

of the cross and resurrection on the one hand and the anticipation of the future coming of the Lord on the other hand as the basis for Christian hope. When a student asked what the task of the Christian is during the meanwhile, between the past event of the cross and the anticipation of the second coming, Barth responded, "In-between we look back and remember, and we look forward and hope. We remember . . . and hope." David Shank recalls, "I was sitting beside John Howard, and close enough to hear him mumble under his breath, 'We obey!'"[46]

There are several ways to read Yoder's interjection during Karl Barth's lecture. Obedience can be posed as a kind of action-focused alternative to belief-centered Christianity, orthopraxy trumps orthodoxy. Obedience can also be understood as the next thing that follows once remembering and hoping have happened: Action must be rooted in correct theology, especially eschatology. But this essay has shown that instead of replacing or following faithful contemplation, the patient yet revolutionary yielding associated with practices of remembrance and hope is itself an act of obedience, whether it is an organized experience of worship, a prayerful meditation, or an act of social protest. Knowing the reconciled creation is the same thing as yielding to it, the same thing as making the peace that Jesus Christ gives.

Where earlier chapters described the patience of revolutionary subordination, this chapter has developed that patience into a pacifist epistemology derived from John Howard Yoder's way of knowing from Jesus Christ.[47] The following chapter deals with the activist and public dimensions of Yoder's pacifist way of knowing.

46. David A. Shank, "Another Grandpa David Story . . . We Obey!" Memo in the possession of the author.

47. Although this chapter may have presented a technically correct interpretation of Yoder's understanding of revolutionary subordination, the variations in applying this term evident between chapters 4 and 6 and here indicate that no clear consensus exists on how best to understand and apply it. These variations demonstrate that the language is easily misconstrued, and thus chapter 13 suggests using a better choice of words, particularly when addressing women who have experienced patriarchal abuse and misconduct.