Introduction

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The interest in John Howard Yoder's theology and ethics keeps growing. The book in hand joins an already swiftly flowing stream. The waters are also somewhat choppy and eddy-filled, with writers from several schools of thought and analytical perspectives promising to explain Yoder's theology better or to highlight a hitherto unexamined relationship or to fit Yoder's thought into one or more predefined boxes. This book promises no less. It too brings a new perspective to understanding Yoder's methodology and theology. But this book also promises a bit more. Its goal is not merely to provide one more interpretation to set alongside others, but actually to go beyond and supersede the existing interpretations with the most representative view to date of Yoder's approach to theology and ethics. That claim requires some explaining.

Yoder's publication of *The Politics of Jesus*[1] in 1972 "rearranged the landscape of theological ethics in the last third of the twentieth century."[2] When *Christianity Today* conducted a poll to identify influential books of the twentieth century, *The Politics of Jesus* came in at number five.[3] In a way that seemed new to theologians and ethicists but that Yoder considered an old view, his book argued that the life and teaching of Jesus were central and normative for Christian ethics. Since it concerned Jesus,

1. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1972). The book was reprinted in 1994 with an epilogue to each chapter as Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994). Citations in this book will follow the pagination of the second edition.

2. Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics*, 23.

3. "Books of the Century," 92.

whom all Christians profess, the book was intrinsically ecumenical, that is, addressed to all Christians. And among Christians of all stripes—mainstream Protestants, Evangelicals, or Catholics—discussions about peace theology took on new dimensions. Whether we had previously identified with a peace church or not, Yoder taught us to think differently. How Yoder the seminal writer taught us to think differently is one particular focus of this book.

The chapters here display an understanding of John Howard Yoder that makes visible the christological outlook that underlies *The Politics of Jesus*, which he posed as a challenge to all Christians, and from which he could address any theological or ethical issue. Awareness of this underlying theological outlook is lacking in many treatments of Yoder's thought.

The distinct perspective presented here is a product of my own interaction with Yoder's thought in conversation with colleagues and scholars, a claim that every writer on Yoder can make. What distinguishes my perspective, however, is that I did not follow the most common, recent path to interaction with Yoder's thought. My route was and is uncommon, even rare.

My serious encounter with the thought of John Howard Yoder began in 1974 in my first year of teaching. That year I filled in for a professor on leave at Goshen College before moving to what is now Bluffton University, where I spent the remainder of my teaching career. My graduate school work was in church history, with a concentration in sixteenth-century reformation theology. But like most faculty in small, liberal arts colleges, I was asked to teach a course outside my area of study. It was a survey course in Christian theology, covering the standard topics such as Christology, Trinity, atonement, the church, and more.

The first question I asked my faculty colleagues was whether there was an Anabaptist or a Mennonite perspective on these issues and doctrines and their classic creedal formulations. In that epoch, it seemed as though one could conjure up an Anabaptist perspective on anything, and I expected to be referred to an article or two that would fill me in. To my surprise, the answers I received to my question were various versions of "I don't know."[4] In a sense, my career since then has been a long-running search for an answer to that original question. Not surprisingly, the

4. This was the epoch in which a humor book could joke that "the Academic Muppie," one of the varieties of Mennonite Urban Professionals, often tends to "work at writing an article or book on 'Anabaptism/Mennonites and Anything.'" Lesher, *Muppie Manual*, 26, 27.

formulation of the question itself has evolved considerably since I first posed it. That evolution is one of many understandings that I owe to John Howard Yoder.

I had no courses in systematic theology in graduate school. As a resource for my first experience in teaching theology, I turned to the one Mennonite theologian with whom I was most familiar, namely John Howard Yoder. In seminary some years earlier, I had encountered Yoder's theology in the course called "Preface to Theology." I retrieved my notes from that course and prepared my own lecture notes using material gleaned from Yoder's lectures, which traced theological developments from the New Testament through the Council of Chalcedon. Needless to say, when the informally published version of the *Preface* lectures became available,[5] I was delighted and immediately put it to use in my course preparations.

Among interesting learnings introduced to me by Yoder's lectures that became *Preface* were that the titles used for Jesus in the New Testament were more varied and had different meanings than when later used with reference to Nicea and Chalcedon; that theologizing about Jesus in the New Testament began with observations about the narrative of Jesus and was carried on with a wide variety of expressions; and that the doctrine of the Trinity was not taught per se in the New Testament but was developed later as an intellectual answer to questions raised but not answered in the New Testament. I soon came to realize that Yoder was allowing us to see that the classic creedal formulas were neither simply summaries of New Testament teaching nor transcendently true statements about Jesus. Rather he was pointing to the particular, historical character of the formulas and showing that they emerged from a particular context. A few short years later, I would learn to say that Yoder had "relativized" the classic formulas.

Thus my introduction to John Howard Yoder was first of all not to Yoder as ethicist but as *theologian*. And what was clear to me already in that early epoch was that Yoder as theologian was not merely repeating and explaining the standard or classic statements of Christology and Trinity. He was opening the possibility of using other language and categories to express the meaning of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament. He was putting on display his conviction that the basis for Christian belief and

5. Yoder, *Preface* (1981). This writing was edited posthumously and published as Yoder, *Preface* (2002).

practice was based, not primarily in the classic creeds and confessions of Christendom, but in the Jesus of the Gospel narratives. This Jesus was the basis for Yoder's theologizing and his ethics.

Meanwhile, observing Yoder's historical approach to Christology led me to ask whether there is a way to view Christology specific to the believers church. I was the primary organizer of a believers church conference at Bluffton University in October 1980 around the theme "Is there a Believers' Church Christology?" John Howard Yoder gave the keynote address, which was later published in expanded and revised form as the essay, "But We Do See Jesus."[6] This essay sketched an approach to a believers church Christology that began already in the New Testament and could bypass the classic categories while nonetheless addressing their concerns for a "high" Christology.

For the conference of October 1980, Yoder made copies of the address available. Following the conference, copies were distributed with a Postscript and a Postface. The Postface noted that the theme of the conference "was made important" by unresolved issues in Mennonite institutions and journals. One of these was his own "Preface to theology" lectures, which had taken "a narrative and relativizing approach" to the "development of early Christian dogma, with special reference to the development of christological creedal statements." Yoder also wrote that some "star performances" had dominated the conference, and the questions of the conference had not been "brought forward very far."[7]

Yoder's comment about his own "relativizing" of the context of the classic creedal statements displays clearly what I had observed in my use of the *Preface* lectures.[8] In the lectures, he showed that the creedal pro-

6. First published as Yoder, "But We Do," *Foundations*. Reprinted as Yoder, "But We Do," *Priestly Kingdom*. Most recently this essay was reprinted as Yoder, "But We Do," *Pacifist*. Citations in this book will refer to the versions in both Yoder's *Priestly Kingdom* and *Pacifist Way of Knowing*.

7. Yoder, "That Household We Are," 9. Since publication of the revised version in *Priestly Kingdom*, the version cited here is no longer available. A printout in my possession contains the postscript here quoted.

Yoder was correct that the conference did not really address the theme. I also recognized that lack. However, even though I was the organizer of the conference, I was still early in my career, and I lacked the courage to challenge presenters such as those Yoder called "star" performers to address the question specifically. In later years, I have often wished that I could replay that conference and vigorously push the theme!

8. The editors of the published version of the *Preface* lectures have this relativizing in mind when they write that Yoder had "deeply imbibed" "mid-twentieth-century prejudices against the 'mythological' character of Nicene Christianity." They believe

nouncements were a particular kind of philosophical answer within a particular, historical context, which raised the obvious question whether there might be different answers in another context. "But We Do See Jesus" did in fact set out a different kind of answer in the context of modern cultural relativism.

But equally important, I could read Yoder's other work from the perspective of what I had come to understand about Yoder as theologian. *The Politics of Jesus* was more than an independent statement of ethics based on the New Testament version of Jesus. Its idea of discipleship to Jesus, the assertion of the normativeness of Jesus for ethics, was a product of the same (non-creedal) theological understanding visible in *Preface*, which produced the relativizing of the classic creeds and put on display the ethical dimension they lacked.[9] *The Original Revolution*,[10] which appeared the year before *The Politics of Jesus*, was more than a display of the nonviolence of Jesus. It reflected Yoder's view of Jesus based on the New Testament rather than on the classic creeds, and exemplified Yoder's assumption that virtually any issue could be addressed from the perspective of Jesus from the New Testament. His christological essay, "But We Do See Jesus," was most certainly not a "provocative, and somewhat postmodern" statement of or link to "classic orthodox theology," as has been claimed.[11] In fact the essay used five New Testament models to demonstrate how to do Christology across cultural lines without simply repeating the classic formulations, and included a suggestion for using the narrative of Jesus in the recent, contemporary context of cultural relativism.

that had Yoder known about developments in patristic scholarship since he wrote the *Preface* lectures, "the text would undoubtedly have looked quite different." Yoder, *Preface* (2002), 26. I disagree with their assessment, which is in effect a defense of the classic formulas. Even if current patristic scholarship presents a different picture than the one current when Yoder wrote these lectures, patristic studies still describes a context that is not that of the New Testament. Yoder's point about recognizing historical particularity and context is still appropriate, and he would still have "relativized" the classic statements. A longer discussion of these comments appears in chapter 1, note 91.

9. For a confirmation by Yoder of this observation that *Politics of Jesus* was more than a statement of ethics and was in fact a theological statement that could address many issues, note his response when it was suggested that he should write a contemporary work on Anabaptist theology. Yoder replied that he had already done so. It was his book *The Politics of Jesus*. See Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics*, 166 n. 10.

10. Yoder, *Original Revolution*.

11. For this designation, see Nation, "Politics Regarding," 39–40, 51 n. 9.

Alongside the christological essay, the other chapters in *Priestly Kingdom* had a coherency not visible to those who knew it only as Yoder's book that followed *The Politics of Jesus*. The well-known essay, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics"[12] was not a stand alone item. It was first printed in *Missionalia* in 1976. Along with "The Disavowal of Constantine,"[13] another major statement of the Constantinian theme also written in 1976, this essay would have been part of Yoder's thinking as he wrote the *Preface* lectures.[14] It seems clear that Yoder's understanding of what Constantine symbolized was a major dimension of the particular context for his historical treatment of Christology in *Preface*. One might even argue that a major but overlooked contribution of Yoder's discussion of Constantine was to raise awareness of the fact that theology always reflects a particular context. Similarly, statements in *Priestly Kingdom* about hermeneutics or the authority of tradition or the kingdom of God as social ethics would also all presuppose the christological, theological preparation available in the *Preface* lectures. In other words, the essays of a collection such as *Priestly Kingdom* or the later *For the Nations*[15] are not as fragmented as sometimes thought but reflect a theological coherency when they are read with awareness of the Jesus-centered, christocentric norm of Yoder the theologian gained from *Preface*.

The import of my journey with Yoder through *Preface* and *Priestly Kingdom* and eventually to *The Politics of Jesus* was to learn that the New Testament narrative of the life and work of Jesus was the basis for theological development and the criterion for evaluating ethics. Thus I observed that for Yoder, theology that used the narrative of Jesus as norm was in conversation with the classic christological categories but not beholden to them for answers in our contemporary context. This theology derived from the narrative was posed as an alternative to standard orthodoxy, an alternative that made living in the story an integral and

12. Yoder, "Constantinian Sources."

13. Reprinted from the 1975/1976 edition of *Tantur Yearbook* as Yoder, "Disavowal of Constantine."

14. That statement is far from a conjecture. Already in 1954 Yoder was writing about "the Constantinian heresy." "Peace without Eschatology: The Constantinian Heresy" was the title of a section of a 1954 lecture. The lecture was subsequently published in a pamphlet of the *Concern* series, and then as chapter 3, "If Christ Is Truly Lord," in Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 55–90, and with the original title as Yoder, "Peace without Eschatology?" 143–67.

15. Yoder, *For the Nations*.

inseparable dimension of theology about Jesus.[16] Yoder did not always stress the alternative nature of his theologizing, and he could also show how to reform orthodox theology from within.[17] But at the same time, the essay "But We Do See Jesus" among others makes clear the possibility of theology not beholden to the classic categories.

Few references to Yoder's *Preface* lectures appear in literature about him or his work. For example, Mark Thiessen Nation's biographical work on Yoder mentions *Preface* only twice, and those without analysis;[18] and the essays in recent collections barely acknowledge *Preface*. It is possible to develop reasonable conjectures why Yoder's *Preface* lectures have not figured prominently in analyses of his thought.[19] One reason is perhaps that scholars took him at his word that he was not doing systematic theology and he refused to write a systematic theology. "If you write a systematic theology," he once warned me, "you will end up defending your system rather than talking about Jesus." More significantly, *Preface*

16. A clarification from Chris Huebner's analysis of the way Yoder used narrative is important at this point. Huebner argued that while Yoder used narrative, he should not be called a narrative theologian. To privilege narrative in that way would make it a methodological given, a position that Yoder rejected. Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 49–68.

17. For example, see A. Weaver, "Missionary Christology."

18. Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 128, 175

19. There are some notable exceptions to this point. Among early treatments of Yoder, A. James Reimer quoted *Preface* when he rejected what he called Yoder's "historical-eschatological (horizontal)" approach in favor of an "ontological (vertical) understanding of the Christ event." Reimer, "Nature and Possibility," 33–55, quote 43. Contra Reimer, Craig Carter, whose work is critiqued in chapter 1, used the *Preface* lectures to argue that Yoder's thought did affirm classic Nicene-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 113–22, 246. Even as Reimer and Carter used *Preface*, it is interesting to note that both began the theological analysis of Yoder with his *Politics of Jesus* before moving to *Preface*. Alain Epp Weaver's treatment of Yoder and the classic creeds uses *Preface* as he points out that although Yoder posed something of an alternative to the classic creeds, it was certainly compatible with their high christological affirmations. A. Weaver, "Missionary Christology." Among the three recent collections of essays on Yoder referenced in this volume, only Phil Stoltzfus made use of *Preface* in his discussion of how Yoder dealt with the wars of Yahweh. See Stoltzfus, "Nonviolent Jesus." Two recent book-length treatments use *Preface*. Paul Martens' first chapter uses *Preface* in *Heterodox Yoder*. Branson Parler makes significant reference to *Preface* but limits the references primarily to Yoder's comments on Nicea, Trinity and Chalcedon. Since Parler does not follow Yoder's complete New Testament methodology described in chapter 1 to follow, his use of *Preface* misses the contextualizing element of Yoder's treatment. See Parler, *Things Hold Together*. Martens and Parler are both critiqued in chapter 1.

was likely viewed as class lectures and thus not as worthy academic writing, an impression fostered by the fact that Yoder did not seek formal publication. When the lectures did appear in print, it was in an informal format distributed by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) in Elkhart, Indiana, and later by the bookstore at Duke University. Neither the format nor this manner of distribution would garner wide distribution and attract attention to it as a major theological work by Yoder.

Such observations make it hardly surprising that *Preface* has not undergone widespread use among academic writers. Nonetheless, because of my early use of this writing, I have long observed that Yoder was doing theology in a way that reflected a peace church ecclesiology, and that this theology was presupposed if not always acknowledged specifically in his various statements of ethics. My particular path to understand Yoder has given me an element of interpretation that is missing from most of the current analyses and descriptions of his thought.

The book in hand makes clear the importance of understanding Yoder's thought via his methodology and Christology visible in the *Preface* lectures and the essay "But We Do See Jesus." This book contains the first treatment that presents Yoder's approach to theology and ethics in terms of his own methodology, namely to develop theology from the New Testament story of Jesus. With that starting point in view, it is evident that he did not reject the classic creedal statements but it is equally clear that he could envision ways to develop the meaning of Jesus that were not beholden to the classic statements. Chapter 1 describes how Yoder saw the development of Christology from its origins in the New Testament through to the emergence of the classic formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon. In this description, attention to the way christological images developed and to Yoder's methodology is as important as the images themselves. And with this complex of Yoder's methodology and images in plain view, it is apparent that the essay "But We Do See Jesus" is neither an aberration nor a statement of classic orthodoxy. This christological essay is a demonstration and a culmination of the methodology displayed throughout the *Preface* lectures.

Yoder's theology that used the narrative of Jesus as norm was not a narrow or sectarian approach. In fact, he considered it an ecumenical beginning point accessible to all Christians. This ecumenical dimension of a foundation in Jesus Christ appears in a 1964 lecture, in which Yoder

noted that the original basis for membership in the World Council of Churches referred not to the Bible or the Trinity or other ancient doctrines but to Jesus Christ.

> The figure of Christ is crucial not only in the context of unity, as a more promising basis of common confession than the comparison of traditional creeds would be, and not only for mission, as one whose human ministry is explicable and can be communicated to man in every culture. Beyond this, the appeal to Christ represents a particular type of confession of truth, a criterion whereby to evaluate faithfulness (and unfaithfulness) within the Christian community.[20]

It is this appeal to the Christ of the New Testament narrative rather than to classic creeds and confessions that was visible to me in the *Preface* lectures.

These observations all make clear that John Howard Yoder's theology and ethics are christocentric, or Jesus-centered. This volume's designation of Yoder as a "radical theologian" is sparked by that description. He was radical in terms of the etymological meaning of the term, which indicates a relationship to the root or origin. Yoder is a radical theologian in that his theology and ethics stem from the root of Christian faith, namely, the Jesus depicted in the New Testament narrative.

Since Yoder eschewed labels for his work, it is hazardous to describe him with a label such as "radical." Even if Yoder might not have used it, an anecdote supports this descriptor. Early in my career I spoke to Yoder about my desire, following his lead, to write an "alternative theology," namely theology that would be an "alternative" to the mainstream theology of Christendom. Yoder cautioned me. Writing an "alternative theology," he said, is a "back-handed way" to establish what you disagree with as the norm. Rather than being an alternative to something, he said, our theology should be "specific to something." And with a faint smile, he suggested, "it should be specific to Jesus." Thus today I designate Yoder a radical theologian because his theology was specific to the New Testament narrative of Jesus, who is the root of Christian faith and practice.

The profound difference made by my distinct route to serious work with Yoder's thought crystallized for me recently, as I read another promise of newness in understanding him, namely the collection of essays

20. Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 133; reprinted Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 183.

in *The New Yoder*.[21] In their introduction, editors Peter Dula and Chris Huebner describe an "old Yoder" and a "new Yoder" in Yoderian scholarship. Neither description quite captured my view of Yoder. A brief summary of their two Yoders and a number of other descriptions of Yoder's thought will clarify the significance of the view presented by the book in hand.

The designations by editors Dula and Huebner of "old" and "new" do not describe Yoder's work itself nor depict changes in his work. Rather these designations identify three changes the editors observed in the scholarly analysis and discussions about Yoder's thought. First, what Dula and Huebner call "old" Yoder essays, essays written before the 1990s, often concerned themselves with ethics. These authors worked primarily "within the parameters of the Christian ethics guild as set by Troeltsch, Rauschenbusch, and the Niebuhr brothers." These well-known writers posed the church-sect typology, with pacifism presumed to reside in the faithful but irrelevant sect types. Yoder's best known work, *The Politics of Jesus*, challenged the idea that pacifism was irrelevant, and old Yoder writers debated whether his articulation of peace was sectarian or "whether it is sufficiently realistic to have anything to say to the increasingly 'complex' world of contemporary politics."[22] Second, most of the old Yoder discussions were carried on by Mennonites. And much of their concern was whether or not Yoder and Mennonite peace ethics were sectarian. And third, old Yoder essays concerned themselves "in a rather direct and narrow way with questions of peace and nonviolence." Thus as depicted by Dula and Huebner, for old Yoder writers, his thought was presumed to be focused primarily on peace and war issues, and for some writers, "peace tends to function as the tail that wags the theological dog."[23]

The "new" Yoder scholarship described by Dula and Huebner poses a marked contrast to "old" Yoder writers. Where old Yoder writers often worried that Yoder was "too conservative" and did not fit within traditional liberal or orthodox categories, new Yoder essays "tend to see him as a radical" who challenged the categories rather than seeking a position within them. Old Yoder writers worried that Yoder's claims that there is no "scratch" from which to begin and that theology always begins with

21. Dula and Huebner, *New Yoder*.
22. Ibid., x–xi.
23. Ibid., xi-xii.

first-century texts left him unable to communicate with the wider world. In contrast, new Yoder writers assume that Yoder is correct about there being no "scratch," and thus they can read Yoder as a postmodern thinker in conversation with other postmodern writers. Further, new Yoder writers find him useful "in exposing the kinds of violence implicit in many of the old liberal orthodoxies." And new Yoder discussions "tend to be conversational or dialogical in their very form," which means that the essays are often part of a larger conversation rather than an exposition of Yoder per se.[24]

A number of other "Yoders" and descriptions of Yoder are also offered in recent scholarship, many of which fall in the "new Yoder" category. In a review of three essay collections referenced in this introduction,[25] David Cramer identified sixteen different Yoders or approaches to Yoder. Although many are compatible, Cramer identified three general approaches to appropriating Yoder. There is the dialogical approach of the essays in *The New Yoder*, which put Yoder in dialogue with other philosophers, ethicists, and theologians. Many of the writings in *Power and Practices* put Yoder in dialogue with himself, while *Radical Ecumenicity* features Yoder in dialogue with the Stone-Campbell denominational tradition.[26]

Other descriptions of Yoder evaluate him with respect to standard orthodoxy. There are claims by Mark Thiessen Nation and Craig Carter that Yoder was orthodox as defined by the classic creeds or that he based his ethics on standard Nicene orthodoxy. Most recently Branson Parler has put Yoder in the orthodox category by labeling him "trinitarian." Such designations have a counterpart, namely an earlier argument by A. James Reimer and the recent argument by Paul Martens that Yoder was heterodox vis-à-vis the classic creeds.[27]

24. Ibid., xii–xvi. A different summary of "new" Yoder is found in Huebner, "Work of Inheritance," 24–25. A book-length example of this "conversational or dialogical" form is Sider, *To See History Doxologically*.

25. *The New Yoder*, *Power and Practices*, and *Radical Ecumenicity*.

26. Cramer, "Inheriting Yoder Faithfully."

27. For the claim of orthodoxy, see Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, throughout, summary on 246, and Nation, "Politics Regarding," 39. For the claim of heterodoxy, see Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, as well as Reimer, "Nature and Possibility." Branson Parler does not call Yoder "orthodox," but his description of Yoder as "trinitarian" and his stress on Yoder's compatibility with Nicea and Chalcedon is an effort to make Yoder acceptable to creedal-oriented Christians who would claim classic orthodoxy. See Parler, *Things Hold Together*.

Yet one more current designation belongs in the discussion, namely that of Yoder as "ad hoc" and "fragmentary" thinker. In his introduction to Yoder in *Power and Practices*, Chris Huebner described Yoder's approach to doing theology as "dialogical and ad hoc," and added that knowing this about Yoder's work can guide our understanding of it. Thus Huebner concludes, the ongoing relevance of Yoder's work across multiple generations perhaps "has something to do with the ad hoc, particular, nomadic, and fragmentary character of his theology."[28] This characterization carries forward the same observation that occurred multiple times in Huebner's earlier book of Yoder-shaped essays, *A Precarious Peace*.[29] Here Huebner suggests that the fragmentary character of Yoder's work "is firmly rooted in his understanding of Christian pacifism."[30]

The existence of these several Yoders and descriptors in the literature stems at least in part from the way that most readers have come to know the thought of John Howard Yoder. As indicated earlier, Yoder's notable influence dates from the publication of his *The Politics of Jesus* in 1972. The majority of scholars interested in Yoder have most often begun with that book and/or consider it his seminal work. For many readers, the next important Yoder volume for study may be his *Priestly Kingdom* followed perhaps by *Christian Witness to the State*[31] or *Original Revolution*, and then perhaps the more recent *Royal Priesthood* and *For the Nations*. *Preface to Theology* barely appears. Reading Yoder in this way may be particularly true for younger scholars. A quick perusal of footnotes in three recent collections—*The New Yoder*, *Power and Politics*, and *Radical Ecumenicity*—reveals that general approach to Yoder. Meanwhile, the posthumously published *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*[32] and *The War of the Lamb*,[33] both of which figure prominently in chapters of the book in hand, have yet to make major inroads into Yoder scholarship.

Beginning with *Politics of Jesus* to understand Yoder's work enables the various descriptions of Yoder to emerge. It can produce Yoder the peace ethicist, who was recognized as an articulate advocate of nonviolence in the wider world as well as by Mennonites excited finally to have

28. Huebner, "Work of Inheritance," 24, 25.
29. Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 22, 101, 102, 118.
30. Ibid., 102.
31. Yoder, *Christian Witness*.
32. Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*.
33. Yoder, *War of the Lamb*.

a widely-recognized and respected advocate for nonviolence. Those Dula and Huebner described as "new Yoder" writers have resonated with the anti-foundational perspective visible in *Priestly Kingdom*, *For the Nations*, and other writings. The peace ethicist who frequently employed remarkable Biblical exegesis and whose books of essays ranged across topics such as hermeneutics, social ethics, the authority of tradition, Christology, Anabaptism, ecclesiology, Emperor Constantine, political democracy, American civil religion, and more would seem to merit the designation ad hoc and fragmentary. Finally, seeing that Yoder could affirm that the classic christological formulas dealt with issues left open by the New Testament writers could allow Yoder to be aligned with traditional orthodoxy. At the same time, for those who accept the classic creeds as unquestioned givens, Yoder's historical critique of the creeds can earn him a designation such as "heterodox."

However, as chapter 1 will demonstrate, none of these characterizations account for the way Yoder actually did theology. The perspective on Yoder's theology presented in this book fits none of the current designations, neither old nor new, neither Nicene nor heterodox nor trinitarian nor ad hoc and fragmentary. Reading these numerous descriptions in recent scholarship focused sharply for me the significance of understanding John Howard Yoder's other writings through the lens of the *Preface* lectures, which display his theological methodology, and his view of christological images both classic and contemporary. The presentation in hand of Yoder as a radical theologian reflects Yoder the christocentric or Jesus-centered theologian visible in *Preface*, an orientation that is lacking or passed over in the several Yoders and descriptors of Yoder in recent scholarship.

It is not that the characterizations of Yoder in "new Yoder" analysis and labeling his writing as ad hoc and fragmentary are false. But they do not say enough. His theological and ethical analysis did range across a wide assortment of issues, and Yoder would address any topic that was requested of him. But the characterizations such as ad hoc or post modern thinker neglect the fact that he was not merely bringing a pacifist perspective to bear in scattered discussions and in a manner that was at home in a postmodern context. They neglect that Yoder's responses were shaped by the conviction that the particular story of Jesus in the New Testament was the basis from which to address any issue. His writings on scattered topics were efforts to take the narrative of Jesus into new

territory and to apply its meaning in a new setting. *Preface* displays this technique of expressing the meaning of the story of Jesus in new contexts within the New Testament itself for the discussion of Christology. Sometimes the christological application in Yoder's essays is explicit; but often Yoder employed the methodology he described as using "the other guy's" language and frame of reference to move the discussion in a nonviolent or following-Jesus direction.[34] With the methodology put on display in *Preface*, these supposedly "scattered" discussions still have an amazing range, but an underlying coherency also comes into view. This coherency is often missed by those whose primary route to understanding Yoder is via *Politics of Jesus* and *Priestly Kingdom* and then other collections of his essays and sermons.

The claims of orthodoxy or trinitarian on one side and heterodoxy on the other are misleading but in different ways. The analysis of chapter 1 to follow will make clear that it is demonstrably false that Yoder based his ethics on Nicene orthodoxy, although the claim contains a kernel of truth. The claims about "heterodoxy" and "trinitarian" are misleading on different sides of the question. Again, although each contains a grain of truth, neither evaluates Yoder in terms of how he actually envisioned Christology.

Recently Gerald Mast described a different route to understanding John Howard Yoder that arrived at a location much like that one that I had identified.[35] Mast's story also introduces an additional element in identifying Yoder as theologian. This element is Anabaptism.

As Mast described his introduction to John Howard Yoder, he followed the common route sketched above of first encountering *The Politics of Jesus* and then moving on to *Priestly Kingdom*. And along the way he discovered that Yoder was relevant for discussions of the postmodern context, which was a major focus of Mast's graduate work in communication and rhetoric. Yoder did offer an interesting approach to methodology that addressed current debates about epistemology in the humanities.

However, Mast brought another interest as well to the reading of John Howard Yoder. Following an early interest in Anabaptist history, Mast's graduate study in communication dealt in a major way with

34. Yoder's mention of the "other guy's" language appears in the memo discussed at the end of chapter 1 to follow.

35. Mast summarized his path to understanding Yoder in an e-mail exchange with me on November 29, 2010. Most references in what follows come from this e-mail, but reflect other conversations as well.

Anabaptists. His dissertation was a rhetorical analysis of sixteenth-century Anabaptist texts.[36] His work in Anabaptist sources led Mast to study many of the same Anabaptist sources that had also occupied John Howard Yoder, such sources as those related to the origin of Anabaptism in Zurich and later the Schleitheim Articles. Mast realized that in Yoder's contemporary theologizing, he was picking up arguments that were not resolved in the sixteenth century and carrying them forward into our world in the twentieth century. These arguments that Yoder found in the Anabaptist sources dealt with the basic content of theology. With that impulse in mind, Mast saw that even a cursory reading of *Martyrs Mirror*, for example, reveals that Anabaptists did not accept the standard patristic or "orthodox" formulas as the final or definitive word. In other words, Mast discovered via Yoder's use of Anabaptist texts that Yoder was showing the way to a theology that was compatible with the high christological concerns of "orthodoxy" but could express those concerns in other ways. These new expressions gave visibility to the narrative of Jesus and his rejection of the sword, which are items lacking in the classic creedal formulations of "orthodoxy."

Mast then read *Priestly Kingdom* from this theological perspective and found that this book is not merely a methodological argument with scattered applications but has stated implications for Christian theology as a whole. For example, he points to Yoder's statement that a "radical reformation" stance is actually a "recurring paradigm" throughout church history and has a "defining agenda" that is "far broader" than any one of its particular instantiations. Or Yoder's declaration that "radical reformers" "changed not simply the definition of certain ministries or churchly practices, but also the entire understanding of what it means to be Christian," and the claim that "the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth" is the "substantial criterion of Christian ethical decisions" for the radical reformers. These emphases are encapsulated in Yoder's well-known statement, "the church precedes the world epistemologically. We know more fully from Jesus Christ and in that context of the confessed faith than we know in other ways."[37]

Thus via studying Anabaptism and reading *Priestly Kingdom*, Gerald Mast came to an understanding of John Howard Yoder's theology that

36. A book that drew on the dissertation but with significant additional sources analyzed is Biesecker-Mast, *Separation and the Sword*.

37. Quotes from Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 5, 107, 116, 11.

is essentially the same as what I developed through *Preface to Theology* and *Priestly Kingdom*. As Mast explained, with the subtitle "Social Ethics as Gospel" Yoder put on display that the book concerned theological ethics. And for Yoder, ethics were not separate from theology. Thus one can see *Priestly Kingdom* as a summary of the methodology Yoder displayed in *Preface to Theology*, or that the ethical implications of *Preface* are instantiated in *Priestly Kingdom*. But the Anabaptist element in Mast's story means that alongside the identifier "radical," Yoder might also properly be called an Anabaptist theologian.

The identifier Anabaptist does need qualification, however. For one thing, Yoder was careful to state that the ecclesial motif he developed was visible in any number of traditions in addition to sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Thus in no way does the label Anabaptist mean that he was merely basing theology on sixteenth-century Anabaptist sources or writing confessional theology for Anabaptists or Mennonites. Further, and more significantly, Yoder's approach is a call to begin with Jesus Christ and his way and his life, and to hold all theology to the criterion of whether it helps Christians to a life that makes Jesus' way visible in the world. He saw historic Anabaptism as one historical instantiation of this impulse. Thus with references to Anabaptism or Radical Reformation, Yoder was pointing to one source (among several) that pointed back to the narrative of Jesus as the true norm of faith and practice, and the criterion by which to measure theological development. Since that call begins with Jesus Christ, Yoder's Anabaptist stance is thus also an ecumenical one that appeals to a confession made by all Christians. This understanding of Yoder as "Anabaptist theologian" is fully compatible with the designation of him as a "radical theologian."

That the paths to understanding John Howard Yoder's theology that I described for myself and for Mast end up at the same point is far from a conjecture or a coincidence. Earl Zimmerman's *Practicing the Politics of Jesus* lays bare that convergence in Yoder's legacy itself. Zimmerman explored the influences in Yoder's life that contributed to his development of *The Politics of Jesus*. Written after Yoder's death, Zimmerman's was the first book to make extensive use of Yoder's correspondence.

As used by Zimmerman, Yoder's correspondence makes clear both his intent to develop a theological perspective that was parallel to but also bypassed standard orthodoxy, and his belief that one root for that theology was found in Anabaptism. In a letter to Paul Peachey, Yoder

wrote of his "growing conviction that there exists a consistent biblicism of discipleship, parallel to Anabaptism not only in ecclesiastical separateness from Calvinism, but in its entire rejection of medieval carryovers in doctrine as well as in life." He saw this happening with Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz, who wanted to reject doctrine that stood between themselves and the Bible, and thus "we should be consistently *wissenschaftlich* [or scholarly], since the more the Bible talks for itself without Anselm or Augustine in the way, the more it talks [about] discipleship."[38]

Yoder's doctoral dissertation at the University of Basil was a historical study that analyzed the discussions and debates between Ulrich Zwingli and the radicals in Zurich who became the first Anabaptists. Yoder had originally sought to write a theological dissertation from within an Anabaptist perspective, a dissertation that would be "an Anabaptist *Vergegenwärtigung* (a contemporary, updated Anabaptist theology)."[39] However, as Yoder explained in letters to Harold Bender and Paul Peachey, he could not find a theologian in a European university who would allow him to work from an Anabaptist perspective. None, he wrote "were open-minded enough to let something they basically disagree with through." Thus he decided for historical work in Anabaptism as a way around the opposition of theologians, but he carefully chose a topic that would allow him to investigate the theological views of the earliest radicals who debated with Zwingli.[40]

Yoder believed that many of his theological views, including what went into *The Politics of Jesus*, had already surfaced in Anabaptism. The two prominent ideas from Anabaptism are the notion of following the way of Jesus, which is a Christian discipleship that is present in the world in the way that Jesus was in the world,[41] and the visible church as a voluntary community of discerning believers. When the idea of discipleship goes beyond the personal to include social ethics, the church appears, which is the beginning of the distinction or separation of church from civil society and civil authority. It is important to understand that in Yoder's view, this is an ecumenical stance. It is ecumenical because every Christian carries the name of Jesus Christ.[42]

38. Cited in Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics*, 113.
39. Ibid., 143.
40. Ibid., 140–41, Yoder citation 141.
41. Ibid., 142, 161.
42. See ibid., 140–72, and Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 285–99.

The book in hand is the first presentation of Yoder's theologizing that makes visible the impulses that truly empowered his thought. This theology was a radical—from the root—appropriation of the norm of Jesus Christ from the New Testament, and it carried forward his appropriation of Anabaptism as a movement that pointed back to the New Testament narrative of Jesus as norm of faith and practice. It is John Howard Yoder, radical and Anabaptist, that this book presents.

Of course one can plug Yoder's comments into mainstream or evangelical orthodoxy or a contemporary, postmodern philosophical framework. But that approach is to interpret Yoder via terms and norms that were not his own. Such approaches serve their own agendas, but they do not depict how Yoder actually worked nor do they truly define his theology. Understanding Yoder in terms of his own radical, Anabaptist assumptions (as these labels are defined here) changes the picture. He is neither "old" nor "new," not merely an "ad hoc" or postmodern thinker, neither truly orthodox nor trinitarian nor heterodox. The Yoder of the volume in hand is the theologian who wrote from a christocentric, bibliocentric effort to appropriate and apply the story of Jesus Christ as the Christian gospel in multiple contexts of the world in which he lived. This Yoder supersedes the other existing descriptors.

The description of Yoder's contextualizing approach to theology and the importance of the essay "But We Do See Jesus" to his theological outlook is validated from a different direction by Glen Stassen's account of his coming to value the work of John Howard Yoder.[43] Since Stassen dealt with Yoder's contextualizing of theology in person, his story suggests Yoder's own confirmation of the accounts here.

In graduate study at Union Theological Seminary and then at Duke University, Stassen focused mostly on historical theology, along with systematic and philosophical theology. He learned New Testament theology from W. D. Davies, who specialized in Jesus' Jewish context. An additional important learning came from work with visiting professor Henry J. Cadbury, whose skepticism on the historical Jesus project prodded Stassen to dig deeper. Finally Duke's Frederick Herzog led students into the history of German Protestant study of Jesus and to engage in dialogue with Günther Bornkamm. Stassen's dissertation focused on H. Richard Niebuhr's wrestling with historical relativism and its relation to Christology.[44] This wrestling with historical theology, historical

43. This account is summarized from e-mail conversation of July 18, 2012.

44. See Stassen, Yeager, and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation*; Stassen, *Thicker Jesus*.

relativism, and Jesus as historically contextualized allowed Stassen to appreciate Yoder's contextualizing of Jesus and the centrality of Jesus in his theology and ethics, as described above. Yoder recognized early that he and Stassen were headed in a similar direction, and initiated what became an enriching and life-long relationship.

Stassen values "But We Do See Jesus" both for its acknowledgement of the necessity of speaking in "pluralist/relativist terms" in our modern context but also that the focus on the message in that language is that Jesus is Lord.[45] From this stance Yoder addressed the problem of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's supposed ditch between universal truth propositions that everyone could claim on one side and particular, relative truth on the other side. Yoder argues that in fact, all truth is relative, all truth is perceived from a particular perspective. Thus there is no other side of the ditch where truth is not perceived from a particular perspective. That there would be such solid ground on the supposed other side of the ditch was "an illusion laid on us by Greek ontology language,"[46] which, Stassen says, was itself a particular, relative perspective developed by people like Plato, who turned out to be advocating an authoritarian society in which the ruler claimed to possess universal truth. Thus Yoder's historical study enabled him to relativize Plato and Greek ontology, and then to interpret the creeds in their historical function but without rejecting them outright.

Thus Stassen came to value greatly the emphasis on the particular historical language about Jesus Christ as Lord as the basis of Yoder's theology. "Jesus participates in localizable, datable history, as many religious hero figures do not. Jesus intervenes in the liberation from violence and he identifies with the poor as many savior figures do not." Stassen emphasizes, with Yoder, that we do not need to try to overwhelm the pluralistic/relativistic culture in which we live. We have only "to stay within our bark, merely afloat and sometimes awash amidst those waves, yet neither dissolving into them nor being carried only where they want to push it."[47] We have an advantage in a culture that is historically and particularistically aware because our loyalty is to Jesus who is historical and particular. We can feel at home in our particular bark in this cultural pluralist/relativist stream.

45. Yoder, "But We Do," *Priestly Kingdom*, 56; Yoder, "But We Do," *Pacifist*, 32–33.
46. Yoder, "But We Do," *Priestly Kingdom*, 59; Yoder, "But We Do," *Pacifist*, 36.
47. Yoder, "But We Do," *Priestly Kingdom*, 57, 58; Yoder, "But We Do," *Pacifist*, 34.

The understanding of Yoder's thought that emerges from the stories from Mast, Zimmerman, Stassen, and myself is one that begins with the New Testament story of Jesus but is told in a way that has the capacity to address any issue. This christological outlook is a theology that is inseparable from its social and ethical dimensions. This theology is cognizant of the standard "orthodox" creeds and formulas and Yoder can advocate them on occasion.[48] At the same time, from early on Yoder was also convinced about the advisability of offering a theological parallel in conversation with but not beholden to the kind of orthodoxy that is based on doctrine but without much Jesus. In *Politics of Jesus*, he described this alternative as "more radically Nicene and Chalcedonian than other views."[49] He could make this claim because his approach actually used the humanity of Jesus and his life and word as an ethical norm in a way that was lacking in the classic formulas, while also affirming the Lordship of Christ, Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's character, God's self, as orthodoxy affirms. Thus when Yoder used the human life of Jesus as found in the Gospel narratives as criterion for the Christian life, it produced a new understanding of the church. Every theological and ethical assignment was in a sense new for Yoder, because it was always a new application of the life and work of Jesus; it was always a "looping back"[50] to discover again that foundational narrative and to use it as the criterion for judging the truthfulness of contemporary theology and practice.

This Yoder is the theologian that I have called radical and Anabaptist. This description has a wider scope and a more theological beginning point than is visible in the description of Yoder as theologian of nonviolence, and it is more theological than the views that see Yoder as postmodern interlocutor in conversation with others. Further, this description of a historical as well as theological Yoder rather clearly corrects those who would see Yoder's thought as based in a defense of classic

48. For example, in "A Theological Critique of Violence" (ch. 1 of *War of the Lamb*), Yoder based his critique on the Apostles' Creed.

49. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (1994), 102. This text has been quoted in efforts to argue that Yoder's Christology was linked to or depended on classic Nicene-Chalcedonian formulas. See Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 128; Nation, "Politics Regarding," 39; Carter, "Liberal Reading," 88; Parler, *Things Hold Together*, 77. However, as the argument here demonstrates, as well as comments in some following chapters, rather than linking himself to the classic formulas, Yoder's intent was to put on display his differences with them and argue that he took their underlying assumptions and implications more seriously than did most proponents of these formulas.

50. Yoder, "Authority of Tradition," 69.

Nicene orthodoxy without sufficient attention to his insistence that theologizing begins with the New Testament story of Jesus.

Yoder is a radical in that his theology stems from the root or the origin of Christian faith, namely the Jesus of the New Testament. He is Anabaptist in that he recognized that sixteenth-century movement as one whose intent was to point to Jesus as the norm of faith and practice. Yoder's writing was an effort to bring Jesus—the root of Christian profession—into the faith and practice of contemporary Christians. As following chapters demonstrate, everything else was an extension or an application of that root. As a follower of Jesus, Yoder was thus a radical theologian.

Christology, both content and methodology, was the priority for Yoder's thought. The three Parts of the book display this orientation and its applications and implications in an interrelated and expanding fashion. The lengthy chapter 1 of Part One puts on display Yoder's methodology and multi-faceted view of Jesus and Christology as they become visible in *Preface to Theology* and the essay "But We Do See Jesus." This chapter concludes with references to a brief memo Yoder wrote on his methodology. These references verify the analysis of Yoder's thought and methodology described in chapter 1.

The four chapters of Part Two display Yoder's relationship to the important sources from which he developed the outlook described in chapter 1. In chapter 2, Earl Zimmerman describes the root of Yoder's thought in sixteenth-century Anabaptism. This chapter makes clear Yoder's intent to do theology that was compatible with but not beholden to classic orthodoxy. Three chapters then deal with contemporaries from whom Yoder borrowed or learned but whom he also modified or went beyond. The import of these chapters is to show that Yoder established his own independent voice vis-à-vis those from whom he learned. In chapter 3, Zachary Walton compares Yoder to Harold S. Bender and his "Anabaptist Vision," showing Bender's influence on Yoder but also how Yoder followed his own inclinations in ways that distinguished him from the Goshen School. In chapter 4, Earl Zimmerman describes Yoder's roots in biblical scholarship learned from Oscar Cullmann, but without Yoder being merely a Cullmann follower. In the final chapter of Part Two, Gerald Mast analyzes the extent to which Yoder was shaped by the theology of Karl Barth but was also somewhat uncomfortable with Barth as a mentor.

The chapters of Part Three extend or apply Yoder's Christology, as well as address a major lacuna in it. Chapter 6 by Ted Grimsrud leads this section by showing how Yoder understood Paul's ethics as a continuation of that of Jesus. In chapter 7, Earl Zimmerman displays how Yoder's Anabaptist thought becomes a way for the "body politics" of the church to be a witness in and to the world. Gerald Mast provides an analysis in chapter 8 of pacifism as patient witness and a way of knowing in Yoder's understanding. The next two chapters show that two posthumously published works by Yoder also reflect, are central to, and extend his application of the narrative of Jesus. In chapter 9, Glen Stassen describes Yoder's application of a theologically understood Jesus for a nonviolent public ethic of peacemaking, in dialogue with Catholic just war theorists and social scientific insights on just peacemaking. Stassen's essay makes major use of *The War of the Lamb*, a book that Yoder was working on at the time of his death. Chapter 10, coauthored by J. Denny Weaver and Earl Zimmerman, makes major use of *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* in showing the implications of Yoder's christological analysis and understanding of the schism for Christian-Jewish dialogue. Then with reference to brief comments by Yoder on his website, this chapter extends the implications of Yoder's Christology to dialogue with Muslims and Hindus as well. Chapter 11, coauthored by J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Mast, uses Weaver's atonement theology to show that Yoder's approach can be extended as a new theological paradigm for the present time, but can also be appropriated to enter a discussion with evangelicalism and with what has been called a "new black theology." The chapter thus illustrates how Yoder's methodology can be extended through open doors into new territory, but can also become the basis for intervening in an ongoing discussion in "the other guy's" framework. These different possible extensions of Yoder's thought given visibility in these six chapters demonstrate why it is not possible to synthesize all of Yoder's writings into one coherent whole. Yoder opened doors but the results on the other side of those doors cannot be synthesized into a whole.

Chapters 1 through 11 deal with Yoder's intervention into theology and reflect the profound and wide-ranging impact it has had on many people, including the authors in this volume. Chapters 12 and 13 take Yoder into new territories, which have only begun to be explored. In chapter 12, Ted Grimsrud describes his own dilemma, his great appreciation for Yoder's theological insight that is confounded by Yoder's personal failure

and the psychological harm caused by his sexual violence of inappropriate crossing of boundaries with numerous women. In the final chapter, Gerald Mast situates Yoder's failure in the longer history of Anabaptist efforts to live up to its ecclesiology and the need to develop addition understandings and resources to deal with our inevitable failings without loosing sight of the vision of Anabaptist discipleship.

The primary goal of this book is to show in widespread detail the view of Yoder just sketched for the three parts—the understanding of Yoder in which theology expands upon Christology, Anabaptist history is a historical marker of discipleship-based ecclesiology, and all resulting in an understanding of Jesus that poses a challenge to and for all Christians. The sketch includes Yoder's failure, which is treated in the last two chapters as well as the Afterword, and constitutes further stimulation to develop additional dimensions of this ecclesiology and our lives as fallible followers of Jesus Christ.

The chapters of this book expand pieces of this description of Yoder. Chapter 1 on Christology and methodology was written specifically for this volume. Chapters 3, 12, and 13 were also written new, specifically for this volume. But all remaining chapters were also produced specifically for this volume. Those who have read extensively in works about Yoder may recognize that parts of other chapters have appeared elsewhere in different contexts. However, any such material has been reshaped for the current discussion and in addition, much new material has been added to arrive at the chapters of this book. It would be impossible to reproduce this volume by assembling the paragraphs of previously published material, and nowhere else have these items been brought together in the present configuration. In other words, the dots connected in this volume draw a new picture of Yoder's approach to theology.

By this point in the Introduction, many readers will have noted that all writers of these chapters are male. The intent of this volume was to portray Yoder's christological methodology. Thus the chapters of this book are not a random collection of essays. They were solicited from Yoder scholars of a small, particular school of Yoderian thought, namely those who recognized Yoder the radical theologian, for whom Christology and practices of the church reach back to the biblical narrative of Jesus rather than standing on Nicene orthodoxy. Until this point, the circle of conversation represented by this book has not included women's participation. Given Yoder's abusive behavior, described in Chapters 12

and 13, Lisa Schirch's Afterword points to the obvious need to include female as well as male viewpoints in the ongoing discussion of Yoder's theology, as well as indicating the importance in general of seeing that pacifist theology and feminist theology should support each other. The Afterword points to *The Nonviolent Atonement* as one such linking of pacifist and feminist theology.

For the most part, conversation in this volume with other understandings of Yoder's thought occurs in the notes. The intent is that this second level discussion not detract from the goal of presenting the comprehensive theological vision of John Howard Yoder, but that the conversation be available in the notes for those who wish to pursue it.

The following chapter now turns to the task of displaying Yoder's methodology and his view of Jesus and Christology.