

Chapter Five

Yoder and Stone-Campbellites: Sorting the Grammar of Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Discipleship

Joe R. Jones

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in the coming together of sometime estranged friends from the Stone-Campbell Movement to discuss the work of John Howard Yoder, one of the most trenchant theologians of the twentieth century. While intending an irenic spirit, in his writings Yoder “took no prisoners”: his analysis of issues bristled with such clarity that his patient readers were compelled *to think hard* about what he wrote and where they stood in relation to it. Yoder may not have answered every question we readers might have brought to the text, but he did speak directly and repeatedly to a decisive set of beliefs and practices that are at the heart of what it means to be a *disciple of Jesus and a member of his ecclesial body*.

In this presentation I do not promise any original contribution to the ongoing work of Yoder scholars.¹ But I do hope to consider the example of Yoder to help us think about what I regard as the Achilles Heel of the Stone-Campbell Movement. In short, I intend to explore the Movement’s hesitation—in all three of its branches—to wrestle with trinitarian orthodoxy and its connection to a more radical understanding of the Christian life and the church in relation to whatever world it might find itself. It is, of course, not the case that other church traditions that claimed trinitarian orthodoxy did in fact obviously succeed in being the community of radical disciples. Yet, neither is it so—given the theological baggage we toted around—that many Stone-Campbellites were able consistently to be a people of radical discipleship.

The nub of the problem, it seems to me, is that the Stone-Campbell Movement’s intent to recover the New Testament church and bypass the orthodox-creating creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon left the Movement utterly exposed to the political world in which it was being born—namely, the rise of American-style democracy and its need for civil religious rationale and support. As a peculiar and self-consciously American movement openly embracing its free-church non-established status, the Stone-Campbell Movement (hereinafter referred to as SCM) simply could not resist being co-opted by the needs of American sectionalism and nationalism and their politics. It might be helpful to see this continual and differentiated co-opting as a facsimile of what Yoder has called the “Constantinianization” of the church.² And Yoder is exactly right: a Constantinian church finds radical discipleship *practically* impossible.

¹ I was a Johnny-come-lately to Yoder. I began seminary instruction in philosophical and systematic theology in 1965. I did not purchase Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* until 1985, and it was only in the late 1980s and the early 90s that Mark Thiessen Nation, then a bright and engaging student of mine at Christian Theological Seminary, insisted that I read Yoder since he thought Yoder and I shared a host of theological convictions. I owe Mark much gratitude for pushing me into having Yoder as a conversation partner, which also opened the door to re-engaging a graduate school colleague of mine from Yale days, Stanley Hauerwas.

² A theme much articulated by Yoder and much discussed by others. See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. 135-147.

My aim is not to provide all the historical documentation of just how it was that all three branches of the SCM—in their differing ways—were simply overwhelmed by American politics, principalities, and powers. Rather, my aim is fourfold: 1) to provide some diagnostic comments about orthodoxy and orthopraxis within the SCM, especially in its first century; 2) to propose an understanding of “radical orthodoxy” as trinitarian in character and radical in relation to any and every world in which it might exist; 3) to explore some central convictions of Yoder regarding Christology and ecclesiology pertaining to radical orthodoxy and radical discipleship; and 4) to engage Yoder and the SCM by constructing a brief *theological imaginary* of trinitarian orthodoxy and radical discipleship.³ Hence, by examining how certain trinitarian theological convictions and practices conceptually interpenetrate, I hope it is clearer how radical discipleship might be kept more keenly on the minds and hearts of the Movement’s pastors, teachers, and laity.⁴

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in the Stone-Campbell Movement

I have argued elsewhere that any Christian ecclesial tradition simply cannot avoid questions of orthodoxy (right belief) and of orthopraxis (right practice).⁵ Such questions are *practically unavoidable* in so far as any ecclesial body cannot persist without identifying in its *actual discourses* those beliefs and practices considered essential to its own self-identity as an ongoing Christian tradition. *Essential* here means those actual *identity markers* the tradition repeatedly returns to and acknowledges as minimally constitutive of its own self-understanding and in the absence of which it would become confused about its own identity and persons outside the tradition would be confused about what it would mean to become an active member. How to decide these matters is, of course, difficult and contentious, and in good Calvinist practice I contend that, however questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxis might be answered, they are always *reformable*.

Surely members of the SCM are keenly aware that in our tradition there was from the start a competing worldly creed: “nobody can tell me what I ought to believe; it is my own private decision.” I would, however, propose that the SCM from the beginning intended to make

³ The expression *imaginary* comes to me by way of its use by Sheldon S. Wolin and Charles Taylor, and I have found it a rich way of talking about the deep interrelation between discourses and practices as construals of the social worlds in the church as well as in other social relationships. See Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17-40, for “political imaginary” and Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 23-30, for “social imaginary,” a concept that he also used extensively in his recent work, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴ I have enjoyed two previous opportunities to work with SCM theologians. See my contribution, “On Being the Church of Jesus Christ,” in a special issue of *Leaven* on “The Church’s One Foundation,” 15, no. 1 (First Quarter, 2007), 6-11. See also “Spiritual Formation and Christian Discourse: The Shaping Power of Christian Discourse,” in *Spiritual Formation and the Future of Stone-Campbell Churches* (Bloomington, IN: Ketch Publications, 2008), 1-20; also reprinted in *Encounter* 69, no. 2 (2008), 29-44.

⁵ Put succinctly, pertaining to the church’s witness, I distinguish between 1) questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxis: what must *always* be said and done; 2) questions of heresy and heretical praxis: what must *never* be said or done; and 3) questions of permissible and nonschismatic disagreement and diversity. See Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 40-43. Hereinafter this work will be referred to as GCF.

the confession of “Jesus Christ is my/our Lord and Savior” as the minimal heart of church belief. Yet all three branches choked at developing any binding or guiding understanding of what it meant to say “Lord” and “Savior” about Jesus and see therein any strong implication about the reality of “the Father” and even less about “the Holy Spirit.”⁶ It is sufficient for my purposes to note that the anti-creedal disposition of all three branches repeatedly obscured from themselves what right beliefs and practices they did have and thereby prevented the communal identification and clarification of theological convictions that might have been beneficial to our ecclesial faithfulness. Further, according to the way in which I am using the term “orthodoxy,” it should not be assumed that all orthodoxies get expressed as “creeds,” though ecclesially they are cousins.

So, in the first century of their lives, what might it have meant in the SCM branches to have even talked about “right belief” and/or “right practice”? In a way that might offend many in all three traditions—to which I apologize now—I would suggest something close to the following is what counted as orthodox within the earlier and common years of the Movement.

1. Orthodoxy was the right belief that the New Testament alone was sufficient for identifying those beliefs and practices that are essential to the church and the Christian life.
2. Orthodoxy was the right belief that Jesus Christ is my/our Lord and Savior.
3. Orthodoxy was the right belief that “where the Scriptures speak we speak and where the Scriptures are silent we are silent.”⁷
4. Orthodoxy was the right belief that the church is comprised of baptized believers only, whereby baptism is by immersion for the remission of sins.
5. Orthodoxy was the right belief that issues of church governance could be settled by reference to the singularly clear pattern of governance of the church in the New Testament.
6. Orthodoxy was the right belief that creeds are human artifices stultifying to Christian understanding and commitment.
7. Orthodoxy was the right belief that the church of the New Testament is more nearly a *movement* among local congregations than what can be called *denominations*, with their defining creeds.

⁶ In ways I seek to justify in GCF, 158-66 (“Patriarchy and ‘Father’ Language”), for particular purposes I will use *Father* as an appropriate—but not the only—way of referring to the First Person of the Trinity.

⁷ This belief often became the practice that if a belief could be found in the “plain sense” of the New Testament, then it was “right to believe it.” How else might we explain the Movement’s continual obfuscating of differences within the New Testament, especially on large issues such as slavery and the status of women?

8. Orthodoxy was the right belief that only a *movement* of Christian congregations could achieve genuine Christian unity.
9. Orthodoxy was the right belief that the United States of America, as a democratic republic, was a God-ordained nation important in God's providential governance of the world, however true it might also be that many Americans lived perversely in sin.
10. Orthopraxis was the right practice of observing the Lord's Supper whenever the faithful gather for worship, independent of ordained priests, apostolic or otherwise.
11. Orthopraxis was the right practice of baptizing by immersion only adult or near-adult persons who have confessed that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior.

Each of us could extend or contract this list according to our own experience and historical judgment.⁸ The point of my list is that, in spite of our resistance to orthodox confessions or creedal statements, the SCM was literally and continually awash in orthodoxies, but few were willing to name and defend the orthodoxies as orthodoxies. Of course, the twentieth century saw the SCM breaking apart as de facto issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxis began rendering the branches unintelligible and opaque to each other. So the question never should have been whether there are orthodoxies or not, but *which orthodoxy and which orthopraxis? And, why that orthodoxy and that orthopraxis and not another?*⁹

We are now in a position to recognize that none of the branches ever developed any consensus about trinitarian orthodoxy nor about any orthopraxis of discipleship such as, for example, refusing to return evil for evil, turning the other cheek when injured, being a slave to Christ, loving the stranger and the enemy, forgiving those who wrongly use and abuse you, refusing to use violence against another, and the making of peace. Surely these practices that Jesus taught in the New Testament might have been foundational of any orthodoxy and orthopraxis in a movement publicly putting the emphasis on being *disciples of Christ*.

Toward a Trinitarian Radical Orthodoxy

What might it mean to talk of “radical orthodoxy”? A contemporary movement calls itself “Radical Orthodoxy,” with such prominent and interesting theologians as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward.¹⁰ While I admire the aim of this movement to critique

⁸ Folk from the Churches of Christ might also identify acappella worship as orthopraxis supported by the orthodox right belief that worship without musical instruments is commanded by God.

⁹ The SCM never reached real agreement about *how* it is that Jesus *saves us*, but neither Nicaea nor Chalcedon elaborated on salvation.

¹⁰ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990); *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003); *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009). For a useful introduction to and exploration of Radical Orthodoxy, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). I think the movement falters

the way modern political liberalism, secularism, and capitalist culture co-opted much of Protestant Liberal Christianity, in this essay I am not interested in exploring and critiquing its arresting proposals. I simply mention this movement because it has promoted a verbal expression—*radical orthodoxy*—important to me in my early years of teaching in those notoriously conflictual times of the late 1960s and the early 70s. My use of “radical orthodoxy” intends no explicit or extended continuity with this current movement.

I wrote my dissertation on Karl Barth, and it was Barth who was pulling me away from my previous Tillichian and Reinhold Niebuhrian inclinations in theology and political ethics. With war raging in Vietnam and in the streets, amidst racism shattering society and churches and political assassinations devastating to political hope, almost every traditional societal pillar was coming under attack: education, religion, economics, politics, and government. It was common for protesters and revolutionaries, inside and outside the church, to blame and dismiss traditional orthodox Christian beliefs as wooden, heavy, and incapacitated to deal with the modern world. In particular, this question loomed heavy and threatening: how could so many American church traditions have ever supported racism and going-to-war in such seemingly unjust ways?

I found it helpful during this turmoil to inform students that it was one of the great curiosities—indeed scandals—of church history that traditions self-identified as orthodox had repeatedly gone to war so easily in the name of king and nation, had repeatedly absorbed the ethos and politics of the particular nation or culture in which it was located, and had repeatedly identified the purposes of God with the political aspirations and causes of its nation, class, or ethnic group.¹¹ In spite of the accusation that the church’s orthodoxy repeatedly succumbed to the ruling principalities and powers and that such orthodoxy was the root of the church’s dreadful subservience to the powers, I averred in return that the problem was more nearly that *the church was not radically orthodox enough*. Were the church truly and radically orthodox, I argued, then it would consistently be clear to the church that it serves God first and that God’s reality and will is known in the compelling contours of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, very God and very human. Only by bearing this in mind could the church refuse to identify God’s will with the arrangements of power and politics in any particular human government and culture. Hence, it was precisely a Chalcedonian Christology and clear trinitarian beliefs—not succumbing to a presumably natural theology that any rational person should properly believe—that would be the radical orthodoxy and radical orthopraxis that had the power and authority to critique the variety of human political loyalties, governments, and social arrangements.

in openly espousing a more Platonic or Neo-Platonic frame of metaphysics. Such a metaphysics, in spite of the admirable attempts by these theologians, can never adequately develop much sense for the agency of God.

¹¹ For a less tendentious historical account of orthodox political theologies, see Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); with Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); and Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook of Christian Political Thought 110-1625* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). On the other hand, see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); and Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, eds., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings in Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

It was this sort of theologizing by Barth that had also empowered and authorized his critique of and nonviolent resistance to the Nazi overpowering of the German church traditions. Once we state firmly that God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth is sovereign and *not* Hitler, we can all play out the logic or grammar of this tenacious, radically orthodox belief. This sort of Barth-like radical orthodoxy should be a theological prophylactic to the church's inclination to serve the reigning lords in whatever political and cultural arrangement it might find itself. Yet it was only in my later encounter with Yoder that the orthopraxis of nonviolence emerged as important to that theological prophylactic.¹²

The orthodox creeds of Nicaea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE) intended to clarify the reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the reality of the God of Israel, the Creator of the world.¹³ If Jesus is where God's sovereignty, will, and purpose are truly and decisively manifest—having become incarnate—then this is the understanding of divinity that critiques all other appeals to divine sanction. Trinitarian belief is not about how three-in-one are magically important; it is about clarifying the divinity of Jesus, how he might be understood as the Lord of all things, and how that Lord is at work in the world. The ruling belief of a genuinely radical orthodoxy is that God is incarnate in Jesus the Jew from Nazareth at a particular time and geography, that this Jesus' life and teaching, his death and resurrection convey an identifiable pattern of beliefs and practices. People who confess this and who thereby follow Jesus are a peculiar people who live differently and serve a Lord different from the various lords and powers found in human societies.

In making this case about the church and radical orthodoxy, I also formulated my first version of the nature and mission of the church, later formulated as:

The church is that liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy Spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God.

Hence, in those uproarious and uprooting times, if the church were truly radically orthodox it would have a more radical sense for what it might mean to be disciples of Jesus prepared to love in odd ways and suffer for such loving. Such discipleship—as radical orthopraxis and radical orthodoxy—is neither complacent about the reigning political lords nor

¹² Concerning The Barmen Declaration of 1934, see *Creeds of the Church*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 517-522. Among many books on Barth and the subjects in this essay is the spirited book by Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, ed. and trans. by George Hunsinger (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976). Yoder was a careful student of Barth's theology, writing an early essay on Barth and war in 1954, which was published in an expanded version as *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970) and republished along with some other Yoder essays on Barth as *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. with a foreword by Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003).

¹³ For the texts of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds, see Leith, *Creeds of the Church*, 28-36.

incessantly seeking ways to overthrow those lords, whether by violence or nonviolence, in order to become the *dominant* power in the world. As might now be apparent, it was Yoder who helped me clarify and develop these concerns further. Even so, my definition emphatically affirms that the church exists to witness in word and deed *for the benefit of the world*. It is the world, with all of its sinful violence and conflict, that God loves and is intent on redeeming! Hence, the abiding issue is how to be *for* the world without being *for* the world on the terms determined acceptable by and subservient to the world.

Considering Yoder's Contributions

Salutary Traits of Yoder's Work

You may be reading this because in some way or another you have found the work of John Howard Yoder particularly challenging and illuminating and perhaps provocatively disturbing. Some of you have also spent more effort than I trying to interpret Yoder to an increasingly larger ecclesial and political audience. I applaud those efforts: Yoder is a gift to the Christian church and every encounter we might have with his works should be an encounter that is spiritually athletic and theologically stringent. Allow me now to identify some of the salutary traits of Yoder's work as I see them.

First, Yoder is continually striving for clarity in his writings: it is more important to him most of the time to be searchingly clear about the subject matter under discussion than to be consoling and encouraging. Of course, the primary clarity he seeks has to do with Jesus of Nazareth and the biblical testimony to him. A great bulk of his writings are about or pivot about who this Jesus is—what sort of life he lived and what sort of teachings he conveyed and embodied in his life and in his death on the cross, and what it would mean to regard him as Lord and Savior of one's life and to be a member of a people who live their lives as his body and his disciples. It is from this centering on Jesus that issues about pacifism, politics, and ecclesiology emerge. If he is wrong about Jesus, then in his own mind he is wrong about pacifism, politics, and ecclesiology. It is not that Yoder thinks what he writes is authoritative because of his own authority as scholar; rather it is Jesus and the New Testament witness to him that is authoritative, and Yoder is the earnest student-scholar intending to understand the nature and content of that authority.

Second, there is amazing complexity as well as simplicity in Yoder as he explores what is involved in being a follower of Jesus. He does surprise us from time to time, refusing to say what we think he should have said or saying what we thought he would never have said.¹⁴ Let me give a couple of examples of his refusal to elaborate, as it might also clarify some of my use of Yoder.

¹⁴ While it is unquestionable that Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas were good friends, with Hauerwas being one of the compelling champions of Yoder's work, it at least brings a smile to see the title of Yoder's 1997 book, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) in contrast to Hauerwas' *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985). Perhaps the difference is more tone than substance, with Hauerwas battling liberal theology and ethics in the high precincts and cathedrals of Protestant theological education. But, as mentioned above, I have long favored an understanding of the nature and mission of the church closer to Yoder's phrasing—"for the benefit of the world"; see GCF, 25-29, 609-617. Cf. Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *For the Nations*, ch. 3, for a surprising and powerful meditation on Jeremiah, Judaism, and the ecclesial power to endure foreign residency without hostility or obsequiousness.

I think Yoder is profoundly trinitarian in his theological understanding, though only in a few instances does he discuss some of the theological issues at stake at Nicaea and Chalcedon.¹⁵ But he never wavers in his belief that Jesus is the revelation of the God of Israel and that his life, death, and resurrection incarnates God's presence in the world. Jesus is the Lamb of God revealing the "grain of the cosmos."¹⁶ In the same connection Yoder claims that Jesus is the beginning of a new eon, a new creation, and that eschatology is decisive for Jesus' preaching and way of life. But I am not aware that Yoder gives any extended attention to such traditional eschatological themes as the status of death and life-beyond-death and salvation eschatologically understood. Though he does not systematically address these topics, it would be wrong to conclude that he did not think them worthy of a disciple's concern. I have wondered whether Yoder ever gave a funeral homily or even commented on death and churchly grieving and hope. Other issues such as justification and grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, the relationship of God to those who do not confess Christ—which is not the same question as their relation to God—and whether God suffers are left unexplored.¹⁷

I make these comments about Yoder in order to suggest that Yoder does not write in order to satisfy all our theological concerns and questions. I say this also in order that we not prematurely conclude that if Yoder did not explicitly and fully explore a particular issue or question then it must not have been important to him and therefore need not be important to us.

Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Discipleship in Yoder

I turn now to identify those aspects of Yoder's theologizing that warrant my identifying him in terms of radical orthodoxy and radical discipleship.¹⁸ First, Yoder's pivotal concerns are Christological and ecclesiological: Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, is the very revelation and

¹⁵ Sometime in the early 1990s Mark Thiessen Nation indicated to me the existence of mimeographed notes of Yoder's lectures in systematic theology at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, delivered over several years from the mid-1960s to about 1980. I bought the lecture notes, gave them a quick scan, and placed them in a Yoder file. It was heartening to see these lectures newly edited and introduced by Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider, published in 2002 as *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Brazos Press). In preparation for writing this essay, I read this later text with some care. I am impressed with Yoder's fair and probing discussion of issues at stake in Nicaea and Chalcedon. While he never quite recommended trinitarian constructions, he did not dismiss them either, clearly recognizing that the creedal controversies were addressing the genuinely serious question of how to explain the divinity of Jesus.

¹⁶ As in the title, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster (Behold the Lamb! Our Victorious Lamb)*, 2d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), esp. 246-47.

¹⁷ Yes, I know Yoder discusses Paul on "justification by grace through faith" in *Politics of Jesus*, 212-227. Without nitpicking what he says about Paul, it is important to understand Paul's language of "justification" and "reconciliation" as involving a *family of uses* that do not yield a precise definition that covers all the uses. But I am concerned that Yoder and a host of recent Pauline scholars neglect a fundamental Pauline conviction, namely, *that something happened in Christ Jesus that affects the universal human situation before God and is prior to any person's acceptance of Jesus as Lord*. That is the priority of God's grace, which it appears to me Yoder systematically underplays. Perhaps this is the Barth-side of me, but it affects how issues of salvation can be analyzed and understood. See GCF, 503-509 and 513-19.

¹⁸ In this section I understand myself as doing no more than identifying convictions and arguments that are so common in Yoder and among Yoderian scholars that I am foregoing the tedious need to footnote all the major points.

incarnation of the God of Israel; and in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus teaches, exemplifies, and conveys a way of life that summons persons to follow him by becoming gathered into a community of belief and practice that is an alternative way of life to the ways of life that seem so evident in the human social and political worlds. It is in the work of Jesus that God is bringing forth a new creation—a new aeon—and thereby revealing the meaning and goal of human history. It is this eschatological claim about Jesus and his work—and therefore about his reality and being—that is at the center of that *ekklesia* of folk summoned into a new way of life.

We should note that these basic claims about Jesus, God, and the new ecclesial community and its way of life are never proposed from any other perspective than as *confessional*.¹⁹ He is, of course, interpreting the New Testament and in that way interpreting Jesus and stands ready to discuss whether he has interpreted the New Testament and Jesus correctly. On a variety of grounds it can be debated whether Yoder has adequately interpreted the New Testament in its testimony to Jesus. But he does not discuss whether anyone should believe these big claims about Jesus by way of arguments independent of Scripture that would corroborate that Jesus is indeed truly God, for example. There is no retreat to an independent metaphysics or social ethics to confirm that Jesus is Lord. In these respects Yoder is akin to Barth.

Second, if the above is an accurate representation of Yoder, for the purposes of discussing Yoder in the context of the SCM branches, what might we construct as *orthodox* for Yoder? I propose the following theses for our consideration:

1. That Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, is the very revelation of the reality and will of the God of Israel, the Creator of the world, and as such, Jesus is divine.
2. That Jesus' life, death, and resurrection reveal a new way of being the people of God, though such a way is a congruent development within the life of Israel.
3. That Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom God is bringing in a new social/political/ethical way of life that centers on love of neighbor, stranger, and enemy, on the refusal to return evil for evil, and on the refusal to use violence and to seek to rule the world through domination and coercion.
4. That Jesus called into being a new community of persons to be his disciples, to follow his path of servanthood, and to practice the new politics among themselves and in relation to the world, and that by so doing this new community will be an alternative community in relation to the other communities/cultures/nations/peoples that presume to give order to their worlds.

¹⁹ As I recall, in the early 1990s one of the reasons Mark Thiessen Nation thought I would enjoy reading more of Yoder was because of my radically confessional understanding of theology. At that time Mark was keen on issues arising in philosophical and theological circles concerning “anti-foundationalism” and was convinced Yoder also was anti-foundationalist. See my discussions of some of these issues in GCF, 17-19, 24-25, 70-79, 101-109, and 141-47.

5. That this new community—the new ecclesia—will struggle to maintain its identity as a community of disciples of Jesus in a variety of ways in relation to the world, intending to be for the world without being so on the world’s own terms.
6. That this new ecclesia, as the body of Christ in the world, confesses that God is in control of history and that such history has purpose and goal, and thereby the church gives up the belief or assumption common among various peoples that they are in charge of the world and it is their task to order the world and to do so by a ‘justifiable use of violence.’

As should be obvious, this delineation of Yoder’s orthodoxy is also a delineation of orthopraxis: these beliefs must be believed and these practices must be lived.

What is not included in Yoder’s orthodoxy? While Yoder insists that Jesus is divine and acknowledges that this belief is the occasion for trinitarian thinking—that is, trinitarian thinking only arises because of the apostolic claims about Jesus’ divinity—Yoder does not seem willing to make trinitarian beliefs essential to the beliefs of the church. Optional, yes, but not essential. Yoder does not include the belief in an inerrant New Testament—though certainly an authoritative New Testament—and thereby he keeps the focus of the church on Jesus and his commandments and promises rather than on each and every sentence in the New Testament as having equal authority. Yoder does not include the belief that the reality of the church is dependent on the presence of “apostolic successors” as an unbroken line of leaders ordained by God.

In what sense, then, might it be illuminating to understand Yoder as embracing *radical orthodoxy* and *radical discipleship*? What is it in Yoder’s work that would justify applying radical orthodoxy to him in differentiation from just the traditional orthodoxies of the church? I suggest that the radical orthodoxy of Yoder consists in his tying two elements inseparably together: 1) the belief in a divine Jesus who summons into being a new community of voluntary disciples defined by their confession of his Lordship, and 2) the community’s practices of forgiveness; of loving neighbors, strangers, and enemies; of making peace and refusing to use violence for presumably justified ends; and of refusing to seek coercive domination of the world. The church’s Lord is Jesus, the church’s way of life is discipleship to Jesus, and the church, as an alternative community, lives differently from the ways of the world. This sort of *radical orthodoxy is inseparable from radical discipleship*, and without the practices of radical discipleship, the church becomes dominated and formed by the principalities and powers of the worlds in which it lives.²⁰

A Theological Imaginary Engaging Yoder and the Stone-Campbell Movement

A Grammar of Radical Orthodoxy as Trinitarian

²⁰ In the language of the New Testament and the church, the uses of the word “world” are varied but interrelated. I have tried to sort out some of the differences and their interrelation in GCF, 47-52, under the heading of “The Dialectic between Church and World.” In short, I distinguish among the following uses of *world*: 1) the world as the cosmos of creatures created by God; 2) the world as any human culture/society with its given structures and relations of order; and 3) the world as any human culture/society infected and skewed by sin. *The church is in the world in all three senses and the world is in the church in all three senses.* Hence, there arises a profound and ineradicable dialectic between the church and the world.

As I mentioned in my earlier brief discussion of “radical orthodoxy,” I am gripped by the conviction that the church must be clear about its identity if it is not to be repeatedly overwhelmed by and conformed to the worlds in which it exists. I am gripped even more by the conviction that *the church’s most basic identity is irrevocably tethered to the identity of God*, or as I have put it, by the radical grammar of the word “God” in the church’s life. Precisely because there are many uses historically of “God”—and therefore many gods seductively hiding under the word “God”—the church cannot maintain a faithful identity in its life through the centuries without an ongoing and relentless conversation about the identity of God. It is in answering this question that the church must confront issues of orthodoxy, and it is in answering this question that the historic traditions of the church laboriously—and often languidly—developed and embraced trinitarian language.

I want now to engage Yoder—and therewith also the SCM—in the question of why trinitarian language is intelligible but only optional. *Why isn’t trinitarian language essential to answering the questions of the identity of God and the identity of the church?*

It is beyond question that for Yoder it is essential to Christian understanding that Jesus is Lord and therefore Jesus is divine. And Yoder has acknowledged that the great trinitarian theologizing in the early church was a search for the proper and adequate Christian understanding of God. It is obvious that in the New Testament the names “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit/Holy Spirit” are used as though they are *distinct*—e.g., the Father did not die on the cross—and yet fundamentally *one*. But do we have a grammar here that would fit well within the polytheistic possibilities of Greco-Roman philosophical and religious life? Supposing now you are an elder in a congregation in Asia Minor engaged in teaching the faith to new converts or would-be-converts and one of them asks, “How it is that Jesus is divine and our Savior but this affirmation is not polytheistic?” What do you say? Trinitarian conversation and the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon are attempts by the church to put some exclusionary brackets on some ways of construing God the Father and Jesus of Nazareth. Nicaea confirmed that the Father and Jesus are one basic divine reality. Chalcedon confirmed that Jesus is both divine and human, and any attempt to deny either is to undermine the capacity to call Jesus Lord and Savior. These decisions are basic grammar for the church, even though there is much more to be said.

Now when some other ecclesial tradition, like the SCM, says we need neither Nicaea nor Chalcedon—we just need the real, human Jesus—the question looms as to how this real, human Jesus is our Savior. In what way is Jesus Savior and what does he save us from? Aside from the important sense in which Jesus summons persons to a new way of life, it must be admitted that Yoder tarries not over further questions about the meaning of salvation. He refuses to stress anything like an *experience* of being converted by Jesus, though there are such experiences and they were bread and butter for much of the SCM. And Yoder is certainly wary of developing atonement theories and he hesitates to clarify any imaginary of ultimate salvation.²¹

Suppose now some tradition goes on to say it is *inappropriate* for the church to attempt to answer these questions in some definitive way and that it must be left up to each individual to answer the questions for herself. The identity of God is left up to the individual to determine for herself, as though the church—as a community of engaging theological conversation—is incapacitated to distinguish between its own common teachings and the predictable struggles

²¹ See GCF, 503-509, for some brief diagnostic comments on the various meanings of “salvation” language.

individuals might have in understanding, accepting, and appropriating those teachings? Isn't that a recipe for unremitting conflict, confusion, illusion, and despair?

Suppose one then says, as does Yoder, that *God is in control of history and the world process*. What sort of *control* are we talking about, such that earnest would-be-believers might know how to conform to and pray to God? As for Yoder, I think he answers this by referring to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus: God has power sufficient to bring God's kingdom to culminating presence in the world and yet God rules in the way Jesus rules as the Lamb of God slain for the redemption of the world. Yoder avers that trinitarian language arises from these concerns and intends to render these questions intelligible to the church, but he makes no further attempt to explore and construct such trinitarian understanding as though it is crucial to the church's understanding of God and therefore also the church's understanding of itself.

I believe that the creedal conversations and rule-making of Nicaea and Chalcedon are theologically crucial to the life of the church, even though I admit some of the church's use of the creeds has been confusing. In these creedal conversations, the church assumed that the identity of the Father—as the God of Israel and Creator of the world—was clear and noncontroversial. Using some metaphysical concepts at hand, the Father was assumed to be immutable, impassible, infinite, all-powerful, and simple. The theological problem was getting Jesus—the Jewish human being who suffered and was crucified—understood in relation to the divinity of the Father. However, at various points in the church's life it was able to *reformulate the question* to become: *how does the divinity of Jesus, given his life, death, and resurrection, affect and modify our understanding of the divinity of the Father?*

I think Yoder saw the radical character of this way of putting the question of the identity and divinity of God, perhaps under the influence of Barth. But he abstained—or thought irrelevant to his concerns—from making further inroads on trinitarian conversation. My concern is that in the absence of such further work, it is virtually unintelligible why anyone should suppose Jesus is Lord and humans are summoned to be his body in the world. Put another way, to say “Jesus is Lord” is to say more than “Jesus is the Lord of *my life*”; it is also to say “Jesus is Lord of the whole creation, whether anyone believes it or not.” Jesus' Lordship does not depend on our believing, even though it is important that the disciples believe he is Lord. Isn't this why the church cannot confess the Lordship of Jesus without moving into trinitarian language about the reality of God and what God has done on behalf of human salvation?

Further, had Yoder pushed more firmly into trinitarian elaboration, he would have had to confront issues concerning the status of the Holy Spirit. Yet in this regard, Yoder is akin to the SCM with its almost complete neglect of the Holy Spirit. Such neglect poses sharply the question of how the language of the divinity of Jesus as Lord and Savior can be sustained and intelligible to the church without a trinitarian understanding of the unity and the complexity *within* the Divine Life. Furthermore, *it is trinitarian grammar that empowers the church to understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as not only a historical series of events but also as salvific events internal to the complex Life of God on behalf of the salvation of the world.*

I invite you to look further at my Grammar book to see the virtues, as well as the truthfulness, of a trinitarian understanding of God. It capacitates the church's discourses to think of God as dynamically both one and complex in which there is real otherness, movement, and relationships within God's Life and in God's free and loving interaction with the world for the redemption of the world. The incarnational narrative about Jesus in the New Testament will surely fall into disarray in the absence of a robust trinitarian understanding of God. Hence, the

radical orthodoxy I propose is one in which the divinity of Jesus reshapes and deepens the church's own life.²²

A Grammar of Radical Discipleship and Ecclesial Identity

I have claimed that it is helpful to understand that issues of radical orthodoxy and radical discipleship are the deep grammar of the church's construal of the *identity of God and the identity of the church*. I remind you that I am also concerned with the perennial problem of the church's relation to the worlds in which it invariably exists and how the church is empowered to maintain a self-understanding that clarifies its ongoing and unavoidable being-in-the-world. What sort of identity must the church have if it is to be *for* the world without being *of* the world or being the vassal of the world? It is herein that I think Yoder's claims about radical discipleship will be helpful for us to examine further.

Radical discipleship is, of course, discipleship to Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that summon the church into existence as the community of persons who live a distinctive way of life. While I think there is more to say about that distinctive way of life than Yoder emphasizes, nevertheless he is right to place discipleship to Jesus as central in the church's life. To drop out or minimize this discipleship and aim to locate the identity of the church by some other conceptual means is for Yoder to cease being the church of Jesus Christ. *The church exists, wherever it exists, only in the form of discipleship.*

How then does Yoder give definiteness to this alternative community's life of discipleship? That way of life includes: confessing sins and repenting; accepting sins as forgiven by God and learning thereby how to forgive others; seeking the good of the neighbor, the stranger, and the enemy and refusing to take the life of another; refusing to use violence against another; refusing to seek retaliation for wrongs done to oneself or to another; refusing to put limits on forgiveness; making peace with others; refusing to rule others as the Gentiles rule by lording over them; and more. These practices are clearly identified throughout the New Testament, and, as practices summoned by Jesus, it would be absurd to say Jesus did not really mean to so summons and form the church as his body.

But! But what?

To understand this ever recurring *but* in the historical lives of the churches, let us focus on the disarming title of one of Yoder's most important books: *The Politics of Jesus*. Why the use of this word *politics*? Yoder tells us that he is aiming to question and counter a typical way in which many liberal Protestant theologians/ethicists have argued that the ethics of Jesus, which we have identified above, are irrelevant to the political realities of the world. They claim that the ethics or politics of Jesus are a useful *norm* but are not a useable *guide* to the church's concrete witness to and life in the world. If Christians really care about the world and its infelicitous conflicts and wars—so a non-Yoderian might argue—then the church must have a social ethics or a politics amenable to the politics of the world. Yoder's counter to this is to claim that Jesus provides an actual politics—a social ethics—that in fact bears upon and interacts with the world's politics. The way of Jesus is also the way of the cross and may include cross-bearing suffering as a consequence of discipleship to Jesus. Hence, the church properly, as the body of

²² See GCF, 149-232, for a full discussion of the case for trinitarian grammar, while at the same time adjusting the way some parts of the traditions have talked about God.

Christ in the world, lives an alternative way of life to the ways of life the world promotes and demands. To live in conformity to Jesus' way of life is the basic calling of the church.

Yet, have not even the various church traditions thought they were living differently from the world, even if they lived often in some *partial conformity* to the world's politics? How then is such done? Perhaps it might be argued that at the heart of the church are the practices of neighbor love—agapic love—in which the Christian and the church seek the good of the neighbor, even the stranger and the enemy as in the category of the *neighbor*. Might it happen, then, that the church so seeks the good of its many neighbors that it takes up—or is willing to endorse and support the taking up of—the sword to protect the neighbor in peril? Ah, there is the rub: the willingness to use violence against another in order to protect oneself or another from violence. For Yoder, that simple allowance of violence in the name of the world's various political orders is the source of *how* the church itself loses its own identity and becomes the vassal of the larger political world in which it exists. When the church sanctions the use of violence in the enviroing politics of the world, then, according to Yoder, it has forfeited its summons to radical discipleship and will thereby lose its distinctive way of life and perhaps its deepest theological identity.

Critics of Yoder are right to see that Yoder tethers the church's identity to radical discipleship to Jesus as that is also tethered to agapic love and agapic love to nonviolence. And yet they criticize Yoder for tethering all these together to comprise the identity of the church. They want a church that can also engage the interests of the worlds' politics on the worlds' own terms. But how is that done? It is done by appealing to some other set of principles that will endorse the use of restrained and justified violence in the political orders of the world in order to control violence and disorder. What principles? Consider how *natural law* can come into play or principles of *political realism*. The church comes to grips with two orders: its own internal order of love, forgiveness, and nonviolence, and the order to the world's various dependencies on violence in the name of peace and protection from harm.

Lest his critics or his followers think Yoder has erected pacifism into an independent principle that is in general persuasive to thoughtful folk, Yoder writes another book, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism*, aiming to distinguish the church's radical discipleship as Messianic Pacifism from a host of other pacifisms with different rationales. Hence, it is not any sort of political pacifism that Yoder is endorsing; it is the pacifism of radical discipleship to Jesus.²³ It is extremely important to note, however, that Yoder is arguing that nonviolence is essential to the church and its radical discipleship, but he is *not* arguing that the politics of the states and nations could be better organized were they to adopt policies of nonviolence. Yet it is certainly clear that Yoder is harsh with Christians who would recommend state violence by reference to the New Testament or the teachings of Jesus. The politics of Jesus are not the politics of the state; the state—in its more or less liberal democratic rationale and form—is of necessity committed to the principled use of violence in order to control random violence and disorder, and whatever role the church might have in stately politics, it would only be to ameliorate specific practices of state violence.²⁴

²³ Revised and expanded edition (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992).

²⁴ It is generally conceded in all philosophical discussions of the politics of the nation-states these days that Hobbes is foundational: citizens concede a monopoly on violence to the state in order that the state will protect them from harm internally within the state and externally from harm by other states and powers. Yet the

To put in clear focus the dilemma of church theology in relation to the use of violence by the nation-state, Yoder argues that Jesus Christ is at the heart of the church, radical discipleship is the form of the church, and such discipleship involves the refusal by the church and the disciple to use violence against another human for whatever urgent or long-term reasons. *A church that practices this sort of radical discipleship is a church that will never be in danger of having its identity given to it or overwhelmed by the world in which it lives. God, Jesus, church identity, discipleship, and nonviolence are tethered together as radical orthodoxy and radical orthopraxis.*

Hence, the real worry about the Constantinianization of the church is not primarily about the church being *established* and under the domain of the state; rather it prevails whenever the church loses its radical discipleship to the various ways in which the state or cultural powers prevail upon the disciples to conform to the state's or the society's endorsement and authority and relinquish the nonviolent character of discipleship.

Conclusion

So how did we Stone-Campbellites become so formed by our worldly circumstances that we—presuming to restore simple New Testament Christianity—stumbled along submitting ourselves variously to American individualism, Southern and Northern warring sentiments and animosities, trusting an inerrant Bible that reduced Jesus to every “jot and tittle” of the text, and casually supporting racism and violence toward women for decades? How did it come about that we fell into reducing discipleship to Jesus to discipleship to American democracy or to our local idiosyncrasies or to our devotion to free market capitalism or to our willingness to go to war to defend American “freedom” or to our passion for liberal politics or to a multi-culturalism that relativizes even Jesus? Might our branches have stayed together and been on target if we had hewed to a radical orthodoxy *and* radical discipleship? Is it not even now the case that each of the branches has its own way of characterizing the other branches as folk who have forsaken the original dynamism of the SCM?

Speaking boldly—as if for the first time?—are there even the theological resources, commitments, and appetites remaining in our various branches to engage robustly the sort of radical orthodoxy and radical discipleship Yoder seems to envisage and which I have pushed even further? Or in what respects would any of us, standing within our SCM tradition, find good theological reasons for questioning or even rejecting the basic outlines of Yoder's vision?

I have my own demurs from Yoder, but I like the stringency of his understanding of church and discipleship. Yet I do not think a simple affirmation of the divinity of Jesus is sufficient without a richer exploration of what Jesus' divinity means for our identification of who God is, and I do not see how the identification of God can finally avoid or walk away from trinitarian articulation. I have tried elsewhere to outline a trinitarian orthodoxy that is compatible with much of Yoder, but also more than Yoder. I am skeptical there can be a real “reformation”

Yoderian/Mennonite advocacy of nonviolence has never quite clarified how the church might reckon with the “police” function of the state in which the issue is not whether to go to war but how might the church construe, accept, and participate in and limit this more modest use of force and coercion. These issues are thoughtfully explored in a recent book edited by a Yoder student and containing essays from some Mennonite and Roman Catholic thinkers: *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabbach (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007). The book advances the thesis that, in light of the “fact” that modern war is beyond any serious ethical justification, neither just war theories nor complete nonviolence can seriously come to grips with the need to control violence in the world and to engage in active peacemaking.

of the church in the absence of a profound principle of identity and critique that reminds the church in all of its life that it has a Lord—Jesus Christ—who summons it to radical discipleship as a radical alternative community to whatever world in which the church lives. In the absence of that reforming principle of identity and critique, the struggling body of the church will inevitably but variably submit to and rejoice in being the chaplain—or perhaps even a cranky prophet—of the various politics and economics of its world’s dominant principalities and powers.

For my own branch of the SCM, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), it is hardly imaginable what it would mean to be radical disciples of Jesus in Yoder’s sense. But then, whatever could it mean to call ourselves Disciples of Christ? Yet I also must admit that my own Christian pilgrimage is deeply rooted in that loose-jointed heritage, even though it is also the case that most of my lifetime of theological work and writings are hardly legible, much less acceptable, to my tradition’s present discourses and practices in their utter disarray. That surely makes me sad, but Paul repeatedly reminds me that we have *these treasures in earthen vessels* that are always in need of reform.

I conclude these reflections on Yoder and us Stone-Campbellites with the question of whether there is even that solicitous and convicting *theological imaginary* among us of a proper radical orthodoxy centered on trinitarian discourses arising from the divinity of Jesus and a proper radical discipleship that comprises the church as a genuinely alternative community—a community neither simply *at-war-with* nor *in-bed-with* the various nations and communities of the world, but also *for-the-world* as those creaturely arrangements of power and goods that need radical redemption.

