

REFLECTION

The Jewish–Christian Schism Revisited

Mitchell Brown

After a conference several years ago on John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas called for a broader examination of Yoder's theological legacy, noting that such an examination would be difficult because many of Yoder's ideas are quite radical, perhaps too radical for the mainstream Christian (*Mennonite Weekly Review*, March 18, 2002). Just how radical is evident in Yoder's essays collected in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*,¹ the main focus of this Reflection. As Hauerwas notes later in the same interview, Yoder's radicalism is a direct result of his focus upon scripture.

On its face, this may seem to be a contradiction, since all Christian theology sees itself as biblical. But there is biblical and then there is biblical, with most systematic theology being less interested in the biblical foundation than in the ensuing theological development. The Radical Reformation was partly a call to be more biblical and less theological, but the precise mixture of Bible and theology has been a problem for the Church ever since. In *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* Yoder comes down decisively on the Bible side of this great divide. Its true radicalism lies in showing what a consistent biblical theology can do.

The first thing to notice is that such a biblical theology doesn't sound very theological. The essays in this book do their theology by talking about the schism between two communities, a schism that Yoder believes should not have happened and that has left both communities damaged. This is the book's first radical moment: Christianity is not somehow better than Judaism, but both communities are less than they should be because they have split apart. Speaking of the traditional account of this schism, Yoder notes:

According to this account, then, "Christianity" broke away from "Judaism" (intellectual, social, ritual). Christians interpret this a supersession, whereby the Jews were left behind, no longer

bearers of God's story. Jews on the other hand interpret that same separation as apostasy, rebellion. Yet both parties agree on what happened and why. My claim is that they are wrong not where they differ but where they agree. (31)

In overcoming this traditional picture Yoder contends there was nothing approaching a normative Judaism until the end of the second century. Thus there was no "Judaism" for "Christianity" to supersede. Indeed, there was no Christianity either. The common story of Paul "creating" a new religion (the Acts story) is explicitly denied by Yoder:

What Saul or "Paul" did was not to found another religion but to define one more stream within Jewry. More narrowly; he created one more stream within *pharisaic* Jewry. (32)

Here we begin to sense the radical thrust of Yoder's narrative. It is the historical Paul who is important, not the "canonical" Paul of Acts. This historical Paul is a not a creation of scripture but has been recovered by modern biblical criticism. Yoder here privileges history in a way common in Biblical Studies departments but deeply unsettling to the faith community. Yet this is precisely the genius of the book. Yoder does not ignore this conflict; rather he fully embraces the historical Paul. Even more important, he understands that this *historical* Paul has *theological* importance.

For Yoder, the church has nothing to fear from history; indeed, the Bible is primarily the memory of an historical community. Yoder gives us first a theology of community, of a people of God, a theology that begins in history. That Paul was a Jew and never denied that fact is essential to the vision Yoder is creating. Paul is the linchpin of this new theology. It is Paul we must look to, in order to see one who predates the schism that "did not have to be" (43).

Yoder is thus offering a program for a new way of doing theology. Beginning with the "did not have to be," he is looking back before the schism that has defined the subsequent traditions. Why? What purpose is served by this seemingly quixotic quest for an ideal past? For what is more accepted than that there are Jews and Christians, and that Christians must convert Jews? But what if this entire picture is wrong from the start? If the schism was a mistake, what does this say to a theological tradition that accepts it as foundational and whose every definition is colored by it?

The beginning of the end of what Yoder calls the period of “tense but tolerable overlapping” (54) comes with Justin Martyr:

Justin is thus engaged, a century after Pentecost, in driving a wedge between two kinds of Christians: those who, following the counsel and theology of Paul, invest in keeping the border between them and Jewry open, and those like himself, whom we have since come to call “Apologetes”, who turn their back on the Jews in the interest of making more sense to the Gentiles. (54)

Justin would be the start of the orthodox position, one that would “rationalize” Christianity. It is important that Yoder calls attention to this break between community and philosophy. For incipient here is the difference between the position of the Radical Reformation and the mainstream. For Yoder as an Anabaptist, the fact of community will be more important than any rationalistic apologetics to “prove” one’s faith. The community will be defined not by orthodoxy but by orthopraxis. However, to speak of such orthopraxis is essentially to speak of a more “Jewish” Christianity. The fall of Christianity thus comes not with Constantine but with Justin, when reason replaced community.

Yoder devotes an entire chapter to spelling out the Jewish quality of the Radical Reformation. Entitled “The Restitution of the Church: An Alternative Perspective on History,” it covers the givenness of the particularity of Jesus, the indispensable *halakah* [laws and their interpretation; “the ways things are done”], and the Jewishness of Jesus’ *halakah*.

When under the rubric of “restitution” we place historical progress under the judgment and promise of the Jewish Jesus, his humanness, his style, his vulnerability to historiography, we are not asking history to stand still or turn back, but we are confessing which way is forward, in the only way Christians can if we really choose to stand with those first Jews who trusted that one day every tongue would confess as Lord the one whose servanthood has brought him to the cross. (141)

This statement outlines the direction of the book. Yoder’s privileging of history is Anabaptist to the core. Community takes the place of dogma. But Yoder does not seek just any community; he is drawn to the time before the fall into dogma. One could argue that this is what Anabaptist theology should

always have been but has not had the courage to be. Anabaptist theology called into question traditional dogmatism, but never wholeheartedly. Yes, the community and its behavior came first, but this radical critique was never taken to the end, the point where it would finally deny importance to Christianity's traditional dogmas. Yet this, I believe, is what Yoder is doing throughout the book. He is not so much denying the dogmatic tradition as relegating it to secondary status. Dogmas will develop when needed to help form a community, but that is all. They are not primary. Describing the final movement from the period of tense overlapping to orthodoxy, Yoder says:

One can suspect that the division was not final until Christians in the fourth century came into political power, and thereby changed not only the resources at their disposal for dealing with adversaries, but also the social meaning of their own faith. Groups called "ebionite" or "Jewish Christian" by their critics survived for centuries more, despite the attacks of the "orthodox" bishops who had the support of the Roman authorities. The notion of their "disappearance" means only that historical memory had no use for them, not that they were no longer around. It was the hellenizing apologetes who produced more literature, and who later become recognized as the "orthodox fathers," at least partly for nonspiritual reasons. (57)

Thus Yoder deconstructs the orthodox position. His sympathies are clearly with those marginalized Christians deemed heretic by the powers that be. The last Jewish Christians suggest the role that Anabaptists will play a thousand years later. Yoder is not arguing for the theology of the "heretics" as being better than the theology of the "orthodox": theological truth is secondary, and it should not intrude upon what is primary, namely the people of God. Schisms should not happen, particularly for reasons of dogma that so often mask those of political power.

The strong resemblance between Jews and Anabaptists is clearly outlined in the next chapter, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist":

The readiness to be atypical, to be nonconformed, of which I have just been writing, is strengthened by one further turn of the argument in which Jewish thought had already taken the path which Jesus followed further, and which the rabbis took

still further. This is the preference for the concrete case....The concrete shape of the culture of faithfulness is more crucial to a people's commonality of commitment than is the piety, with which it is filled out, kept alive, personalized and explained to outsiders. (74)

Again theology and its attendant dogmatic piety are made secondary. Yoder argues there are really two traditions: the orthodox who put piety and apology first, and the others:

Jesus, Jewry, and the minority churches do it the other way. They first name representative acts that are imperative or excluded. This is *Halakah*. Then *Haggadah*, spirituality, considers why such judgments make good sense. (75)

Here Yoder recalls a distinction made a generation ago by the historian of Anabaptism, Robert Friedmann:

Apparently, then, Anabaptism represents a new type of Christianity, different from the traditional patterns of Protestantism in general. It is certainly not a creedal (i.e., theological) church in which the fruits of salvation may be enjoyed. Thus the question is not without meaning whether Anabaptism may still be considered as part of the great Protestant family (aside from the merely negative form of separation from Rome).²

Thus we see again the importance of the schism. At the schism Christianity lost its relationship with Judaism and thus lost its *halakah*. To recover, to radically recover, this Christianity will take a rethinking of the schism. It wasn't just Constantine; he was just a symptom of a deeper and older disease.

Ironically, as Yoder presents this devastating critique of orthodox Christianity, the thinker closest to him, and one must say *halakically* with him, is seeking to defend a theology of radical orthodoxy. In his 2001 Gifford lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe*,³ Stanley Hauerwas takes his title from an essay of Yoder's, but the content of the two works could not be more different. Where Yoder deconstructs the orthodox tradition by keeping with the community, Hauerwas seeks to build his vision of community through

the dogmatic tradition. Like Yoder, he mistrusts any argument for God, but unlike Yoder he believes the way to theology is not through community but through dogma that forms the community:

The Trinity is not a further specification of a more determinative reality called God, because there is no more determinative reality than the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From the perspective of those that think we must first “prove” the existence of God before we can say anything about that God, the claim by Christians that God is trinity cannot help but appear a “confessional” assertion that is unintelligible for anyone who is not a Christian. (1)

Hauerwas begins from the opposite pole of theology than Yoder. However, I believe they will end up in very much the same place (the “politics” of Jesus) though their methods could not be more different. Hauerwas is a “vertical” theologian, going to the depths of the orthodox tradition and radically redefining it. But he is unrelentingly orthodox. Yoder is a “horizontal” theologian, staying on the historical surface and tracing the development of the community of God’s people. He finally has very little need for the orthodox language so important to Hauerwas.

Perhaps this is as it should be: the radically orthodox Hauerwas and the pragmatic biblicist Yoder. Two very different traditions: one profoundly “Catholic,” the other profoundly Anabaptist. The other, “heretical” paradigm is given an apposite description by Rowan Williams in discussing Cardinal Newman’s view of Arianism:

Newman’s version of the fourth-century crisis ... rests upon a characterization of Arianism as radically ‘other’ in several respects....What unifies these diverse distortions of catholic truth is their common rejection of mystical and symbolic readings of the world in general and Scripture in particular; they are all doomed to remain at the level of surface reality. And it is this ‘Judaizing’ tendency that provoked the early Church’s worst crisis; let the modern reader take heed.⁴

Recalling Wittgenstein, Yoder can say with him: “We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!” (*Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 107). This is where Yoder wants us: a theology of the ground/

surface, a theology of history, a theology of the historical Paul and the historical Jesus.

Yoder is not afraid to take on the most difficult question facing any dialogue between Judaism and Christianity: Jesus. After all, when the discussion is over, the situation remains the same: Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah, while Jews do not. Case closed, end of discussion. Not for Yoder. In the most radical section of this most radical book he addresses the question by restating the “accepted” formulation:

Many who call themselves “Christians” do not believe any more in Jesus as the Messiah, any more than the Jews do. For many Christians the statement “Jesus is Messiah” is not meaningful, or is not verifiable, or is not relevant. Some would not say it is not true but would be at a loss to say how it would make any difference. “Christ” is for them simply Jesus’ middle name. (111)

Yoder’s pragmatism invades even the most sacred space of Christology. To say Jesus is Messiah means nothing if we do not act in a way proclaiming that lordship. Once again the Jewish-Christian *halakah* takes precedence over the more orthodox affirmation. And this opens the door for conversation with those who, though they don’t confess Jesus as Messiah, act as if they do:

Within the new Jewish interest in Jesus ... some Jewish thinkers have overcome their historically justified resentments and historically conditioned definitions of what Jesus had so long meant to them, as a symbol of their being persecuted. Some of them have done this so redemptively and so creatively as to suggest that no Jew can be sure that, when genuinely the age to come will have come – however that be imagined – that fulfillment then will be different from the Kingdom which Jesus announced prematurely. Then what Christians (those who do) look forward to as “second coming” may not have to be any different in substance from what Jews (those who do) look forward to as the first. (112)

Thus Yoder offers us a profoundly historical theology, one based not

on dogmas and concepts but on the communities that witness to the reality of God's kingdom, communities of Jews and Christians, each of which is in need of the other.

This book needs to be read by the church and not just the "usual suspects," the university teachers who are so appreciative of Yoder. Yes, Yoder is difficult: when our church studied portions of the book, there was a collective groan. While Yoder is no stylist, neither is he a user of the arcane language of academic theology. He is simply thinking hard about difficult matters, and his language is remarkably untechnical. The book must be read throughout the Mennonite church. Indeed, it makes no sense outside that context. For Yoder is not dispensing theological truth; rather, he is looking to the history of God's people and calling for repentance. We have gone astray, both Jews and Christians. The way is there, as it has always been, the way of Jesus.

Yoder's book is a call to recover that way. The journey will be deeply disturbing to some long-held beliefs, but it is a journey the Mennonite church must take. The schism that has rent the Kingdom of God for nearly two thousand years must be healed, and Yoder's radical book offers the outline of a theology capable of such work.

Notes

¹ Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs, eds., *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

² Robert Friedmann, *Hutterite Studies* (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 1961), 34.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 5.

Mitchell Brown is pastor of Evanston Mennonite Church in Evanston, Illinois. This Reflection arose out of a Sunday School class that studied The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited.