John Howard Yoder: Naysayer or Alternative Yes Man? A Response to James Brenneman's "New School of Thought"

Andrew Suderman

On January 15, 2010, James Brenneman, President of Goshen College,[1] delivered a sermon entitled "Getting to Yes and Amen! The New GC 'School of Thought.'" This sermon, along with Goshen College's decision to begin to play an instrumental version of the United States national anthem at sporting events, has proved to be quite controversial. The playing of the national anthem on March 23, 2010 marked the first time it had been played since intercollegiate athletics began at Goshen College in 1957.[2] To play the anthem – a decision reversed by the College board of governors in June 2011 – sparked considerable debate, particularly as to how Mennonites relate to the state and its symbols.

Controversial decisions and policies are inevitable when changes are sought and made by a leader of an established school that possesses its own ethos, history, and tradition. My interest, therefore, is not in particular policies that are being changed or introduced, such as the decision to play an instrumental version of the national anthem before sporting events as an act of hospitality. These matters are important and should be debated.[3] My interest lies rather in the assumptions that lie behind the decisions.

Proclaiming the inauguration of a "new school of thought" inevitably also means proclaiming what one is moving away from, and presumably why. In his sermon Brenneman outlines the reasons for the change. Especially interesting in his articulation of the new school of thought is his portrayal of the old one that existed (exists) in Goshen College, and how this new perspective proposes to change the College's ethos. He connects the old school of thought with the thought of John Howard Yoder, and thereby critiques Yoder in a deliberate attempt to move away from what Brenneman describes as a "nay-saying," "radical dissenting" theology. In this paper I will examine Brenneman's reading and understanding of Yoder, along with his description of the Mennonite/Anabaptist movement and tradition. I will

summarize both his critique of the old school of thought and his proposed new school of thought, and then respond to his argument.

It is important to recognize that Brenneman's proposed shift comes in a sermon, a medium that typically cannot provide the necessary rationale, argumentation, or nuance for making such a major move. Responding to such a medium thus poses a challenge.[4] Nevertheless, there is a consistent logic, argumentation, and rationale throughout the sermon as to what Brenneman wants to move away from and move towards, and why. It has a concrete argument and logic that makes it possible for us to engage the sermon and respond to it. *(Page numbers in parentheses below are for one printed-out version of the posted sermon.)*

Brenneman's "New School of Thought"

The "new school of thought" must be understood via the "old school of thought." Brenneman presents a hopeful, positive, and stimulating vision. He does not want the "no's" of life, which are often more abundant than the "yeses," to be the driving force of our lives and relationships. Although he admits that saying "no" is not necessarily a bad thing, he suggests that a distinct school of thought and culture has taken hold of Goshen College, "a culture of dissent."[5] He states that "sometimes the no's of life keep us from making big mistakes. Sometimes they set limits on less than good behavior and help us deal with life's disappointments. Life's no's teach us how to argue a point, or prioritize what's important. A 'no' can even lead us to the next great opportunity." His concern, however, is that the College has had no difficulty in "just saying no." Brenneman argues that this culture or ethos embodied in Goshen is arrived at honestly. The emergence of the Anabaptist movement, he suggests, arose because its members just said "no."

> They [Anabaptists] just said no to the fundamental religious and civil order of the time. They just said no to the church and state union that had been dominating the world for some thousand years. They championed human freedom and separation of church and state and were persecuted and executed for those beliefs, which have since been enshrined in all Western democracies. No wonder they have been described by historians

> and others as "radical dissenters," "sectarian naysayers," and "prophetic nonconformists." (1)

The Anabaptist movement, and thus Mennonites who have their roots in it, were "idealists" and "perfectionists" who viewed compromise as sinful, continues Brenneman. This idealistic perfectionist stance was, however, not tested or developed in the social and political life of the time, and therefore compromise was not developed as a positive norm (1). This, he argues, is the result of choosing to be prophetic dissenters, a stance that emerges from the biblical prophets who were primarily naysayers.

Brenneman contends that the culture of dissent emerging from the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement has become entrenched as radical dissent, nonconforming idealism, and prophetic disestablishmentarianism in Goshen College through the work of Dean H.S. Bender and John Howard Yoder. Brenneman sees this culture pitted against the insights of J. Lawrence Burkholder, who "called for all Christians, Mennonites and others, including all those of other faiths trained at Mennonite colleges, to become engaged in the civil, business, political and institutional establishments of the world" (2). Brenneman argues that the school of thought articulated by Bender and Yoder "cared much less about political effectiveness, even arguing . . . for a certain 'social irresponsibility' by Christians separated from the world in order to be witnesses to the world" (2). Instead of looking at ways Christians can participate in the different establishments of the world, Goshen College has been entrenched in a culture of dissent that simply says "no" to positive engagement.

Rather than focusing on the Christians' "no's" that help maintain a faithful witness to the world, Brenneman advocates for positive engagement and social responsibility (as opposed to Yoder's "social irresponsibility") as a worthy vocation for Christian participation.

> [Burkholder] did not see such engagement [with civil, business, political, and institutional establishments of the world] as a negative compromise per se. Nor did he see such engagement as a concession to the demands of the nations. . . . Dr. Burkholder saw engagement in and with the world 'as a way . . . of serving Christ by loving the neighbor with greater effectiveness' by

> helping to change the intellectual and political systems from within the civic and cultural institutions (2).

Through this positive engagement, the "new school of thought" can be of value by inviting Christians to be responsible, constructive agents in the professions available to them (2). Brenneman hopes this engagement will be a balance between the dissenting voice against injustice and the affirming voice for participating in and creating just systems. He seeks to balance the dissenting prophetic stance with that of the Wisdom tradition. He states, "We need some Naysayers. . . . Goshen College has been particularly good at nurturing dissenters, prophets, and nonconformists . . . and we've been good at saying who we are not. . . . But, I believe, at this time in Goshen's history, we need a lot more radical 'Yea-sayers.' We need to create a culture of assent alongside our historic culture of dissent. . . . We need to say who we are in positive, contagious ways" (3).

> We need you to become the diplomats helping to negotiate peace at the highest levels for national and international communities. We need you to become policy wonks and administrators, business gurus, heads of national and international governmental and non-governmental agencies, institutional and political leaders, salt, leaven and light to advance to [the] kingdom of Christ, 'God's Great Yes!' in the world and in the church. (3)

Responding to Brenneman's "New School of Thought"

It is easy to get excited about the vision Brenneman articulates, as his "new school of thought" is one that invites Christians to be involved in society and be responsible members of it. His depiction of the "old school of thought," including the tradition from which it emerged, is, however, problematic.

Yoder's iconic status in Mennonite theology has led to the unfortunate reality that any criticism of him and his work can be, and unfortunately sometimes is, considered as an assault on what it means to be Mennonite or as "non-Mennonite." The result is that Yoder is read uncritically. Brenneman reads Yoder critically, and for this he is to be commended.

Brenneman suggests that Goshen College's "culture of dissent" is a result of (a) Yoder's emphasis on "social irresponsibility," which Brenneman

interprets as disengagement from the world, and (b) the continuation of the radical dissenting role that Christians and the church are encouraged to play in the world, a role emerging naturally from the Anabaptist movement and continued in Yoder's work. However, this characterization seems to misunderstand Yoder, and the conclusions misrepresent and misinterpret both Yoder and the historic witness of the Anabaptist movement. I will focus on three important aspects of this characterization: (a) the caricature of Yoder as interested in withdrawing from the world, thus being "socially irresponsible"; (b) the charge that Yoder was simply a prophetic dissenter; and (c) the claim that Goshen College, as a result of Yoder and Bender, has come by its roles as "radical dissenter," "sectarian naysayer," and "prophetic nonconformer" honestly due to its inheritance of the Anabaptist history and story.

Social Irresponsibility

For Brenneman, Yoder's use of the phrase "social irresponsibility" demonstrates an advocacy for disengagement from the world so that Christians can pursue faithful living and faithfulness as the primary goal rather than effectively witnessing to the world (2). However, Brenneman fails to pay attention to the larger context and debate in which Yoder uses this phrase.[6] Unlike many theologians who seek to provide a coherent systematized theology, Yoder wrote contextually, responding to issues, discussions, and broader themes arising in his time. To understand him, we must understand the context to which he was speaking. This is of course true of all theologians; however, the difference is that many theologians seek to develop and present a mode of theological/philosophical enquiry that leads to timeless theological/philosophical truths which are not dependent on context. Yoder, by contrast, did not succumb to this temptation. He did not try to provide a theology or a theological method that sought to establish a particular timelessness. As a result, he engaged in theological issues being debated at the time. Yoder himself "was wary of categorizing labels for his own work, and he avoided commitments to specific methods," says Mark Thiessen Nation. "This wariness was one of the reasons he gave for not writing 'the big book,' that is to say a book that definitively gave his views on Christian ethics."[7]

Yoder is at times misunderstood "because he challenges the very terms of the debate that many of us who read him continue to employ."[8] In this particular instance, Yoder used the phrase "social irresponsibility" in a 1954 paper for a debate exploring the relationship between Christians and the state.[9] In this debate, he noticed that the term "responsibility" was often used as an emotional appeal towards a virtue that did not require a precise definition. It was simply assumed that one did not want to be "irresponsible." Yoder notes that the term "responsibility" was generally taken to "[signify] a commitment to consider the survival, the interests, or the power of one's own nation, state, or class as taking priority over the survival, interests, or power of other persons or groups, of all of humanity, of the 'enemy,' or of the church."[10] That is, the common understanding of "responsibility" prioritized the state over the church, and oneself and one's group over others, including the enemy.[11] To be "responsible" was to respond to an either/or dualism that clothes egotism in the dress of altruism.[12] "And yet it is uniformly one's own social order, never the opposing one [that is prioritized]; one's own family, not that of the brother across the border, which is served so heroically."[13]

Typical of Yoder, rather than picking the best option posited by a false (or forced) dichotomy, he seeks an alternative way. He identifies certain priorities in his search, the most critical being the centrality of the church. He affirms the centrality of the church and its core message of calling everyone to turn to God, and for those who respond to this call to live in love as the basis for both knowledge and decisions.[14] "The state, or more generally the organization of society, exists according to the message of the New Testament for the sake of the work of the church and not vice versa."[15] If the church is central to both knowledge and decision making, and if the church is central even in its relationship to the state, "responsibility" will, for Christians, look different as they serve the church as their primary focus. "Christian responsibility" may look different and be understood differently than "responsibility" does for those who are not part of the church. Responsibility for the Christian will lead to a different way of being and form of life – a strange way of being – within the world, as different priorities drive the "responsible Christian." Christian responsibility, therefore, has as its mandate and priority the seeking of the welfare of the Kingdom of God rather than the welfare of the state.

We see then that Yoder, contra Brenneman, encourages active involvement in the world.[16] But for Christians who believe the world has been conquered through the lamb and whose knowledge, creativity, and ontological being is shaped through that reality, involvement in the world will look different. Yoder says this belief

> . . . [frees] us from feeling that we must always choose between faithful but irrelevant dualism and relevant but unfaithful compromise … by disassociating *involvement* from *moralism*. The incarnation is by definition *involvement*; Christ himself was in the middle of the socio-political maelstrom of military occupation and underground war, 'yet without sin.' To equate *involvement* with *compromise* and the *compromise* with *sin* so that sin is an *essential* dimension of the human situation is not only Christologically unorthodox and the death of fruitful thought; it sells out in advance to the same kind of legalism it intended to combat, for it defines *sin* as the breaking of absolute rules.[17]

Yoder argues that assuming that involvement requires compromise, and that compromise means sin, gives in to the same kind of legalism that strives for a more "realistic" and "relevant" involvement within the world. This legalism is similar to that which dismisses Jesus' ethic as unrealistic.

Whether or not one agrees with Yoder's understanding of the primacy of the Lordship of Jesus and the primacy of the church's role in defining what "responsibility" means for Christians as the foundation for their knowledge and decision making, one cannot argue that Yoder encourages disengagement from the world. Rather, he presents a different view of how to be engaged in the world – an alternative view of responsibility. This moves away from the typically vague, emotionally charged view of responsibility that is based on a false (or forced) dualism (e.g., fight or flight, be active or do nothing, kill or be killed, and so forth) to one that brings forward unique, exciting, and creative ways of participating in the world.[18]

Brenneman's claim that Yoder encouraged a certain "social irresponsibility," in that he urged some form of disengagement from the world and non-involvement in seeking solutions for the world's problems, is simply incorrect. For Yoder, engagement with the world happens in strange

and different ways: the world would be transformed through the church, not through the state; the world has been saved through the lamb, not the lion; the Kingdom of God is demonstrated through servanthood, not dominance; through peace, not violence; through the cross, not a sword. It is a peculiar way to be involved, to be sure. But it is incorrect to claim that Yoder believed Christians would not or should not be engaged in the world.

"Prophetic dissenter" and "naysayer"

In addition to describing Yoder as an advocate of disengagement from the world, Brenneman characterizes him as a "naysayer" and "radical dissenter," which, one is led to believe, follows from the prophetic tradition. Brenneman expresses his desire that Goshen College move away from its "culture of dissent" and embrace a "culture of assent." He portrays this new culture of assent as producing radical yea-sayers rather than radical naysayers who are apparently inheritors of Yoder, the "greatest advocate and facilitator of this 'radical dissent'" (2). Brenneman wants to move beyond naysaying or "prophetic dissenting" to proclaiming a radical "Yes, we can," and thus participating in the world in creating just systems. He claims that prophetic dissent arises from a tradition of "selective nonparticipation," whose key figures or events are the Exodus, the Prophets, and Jesus himself. Yea-saying, in turn, is fruit of the Wisdom tradition (3).

Two questions arise from the effort to pit these two traditions against each other. First, while Brenneman correctly perceives Yoder's affinity with the prophetic tradition, particularly with the peripheral prophetic tradition,[19] did Yoder really understood the prophetic tradition as dissent?

John C. Nugent provides a helpful perspective on Yoder's Old Testament narration and its implications for social ethics.[20] He suggests that Yoder did not accept the premise of discontinuity between Old and New Testament ethical teaching. Rather, since the NT freely appropriates the OT as its antecedent tradition with no system-induced anxiety about violating dispensational boundaries, Yoder saw continuity between the two testaments where others saw discontinuity.[21] Nugent indicates that Yoder understood biblical texts in their canonical form and assumed they hung together and presented a coherent message. He assumed scripture was directional, moving from the Old to the New and understanding the OT in light of the NT.[22]

Nugent describes this approach as "Canonical-Directional."[23] Yoder affirms Scripture's promise/fulfillment structure:[24] "Since Jesus is the fulfillment of a salvation historical trajectory that began in the Old Testament, he is the critical interpretive key for discerning between Old Testament developments that constituted genuine progress in the direction God was heading and those that constituted harmful deviations that needed to be overcome."[25] Put another way, events that occurred in the OT have become clearer as to whether they followed and participated in God's overall plan and intention in light of the NT, in particular Jesus.

Beginning with God's call of Abraham, the root of the origin of God's people, Yoder notes the specific call to a particular way of life, a call reiterated throughout the story of Israel. "The change in world history that God envisioned through Abraham is neither a change in rulership over Babylon nor a territorial shift away from Chaldea; it is the creation of a new world of possibilities – 'the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them.'"[26] The people of Israel needed regular reminders of the call to be this distinct community. Israel's request for a king signals, for Yoder, a rejection by the Israelites of God's position as king and as the one who will protect them. The decision to rely on kingship rather than YHWH signifies a deviation from God's ultimate plan of their being a distinct community, a priestly kingdom, "under the sovereign reign that trusts in God alone and bears faithful witness to his peaceful intentions for all creation."[27] This deviation is at the heart of the prophets' message to their people. Jesus, by choosing not to reestablish a kingship like all other nations, including Israel, pointed to this original intention of God.

> Israel could never go back to a strict YHWH war posture; their expectation of an eternal kingship (2 Samuel 7:12-16) would not allow for that. Israel could only move forward with a radically new understanding of kingship. So God transforms it into something useful both to reaffirm his reign and to reconfigure the shape of his people. He does this through the image of a servant who establishes God's liberating justice on earth in quietness and weakness.[28]

In Jesus we find a radically different example of kingship. Furthermore, we find a radically different understanding of the kingdom that has arrived, albeit not fully, which this king has come to proclaim. "Because the agenda of the *ekklesia* is the agenda of God's kingdom, its interests are not narrow but broadly inclusive of all things that impact the welfare of society as well as creation."[29]

Brenneman correctly points to Yoder's affinity with the prophetic tradition as it sought to remind Israel of God's intention for God's people to be a distinct community, a priestly kingdom that willingly lives under the sovereignty and rulership of God in full trust while participating in bringing about God's peaceful intentions for all creation. However, in light of Nugent's contribution we cannot say that Yoder's affinity with the prophetic tradition was the affinity of dissent. The prophetic voices reminded Israel about their role in God's intention to be a distinct community. In following this tradition, Jesus was not pioneering a new way of relating to governing authorities or structures or a new attitude toward monarchical posturing of God's people in the world.[30] "Rather, he announced that what Israel's prophets began to envision and longed to see was materializing more concretely now that the Kingdom of God was at hand."[31]

The second question arising from Brenneman's depiction of the two traditions is whether Jesus is best understood as a prophetic dissenter in the "selective nonparticipation" tradition. While Jesus is described in scripture as Wisdom incarnate, Brenneman puts him into the camp of prophetic dissent. He then advocates moving away from that camp, wanting to pursue and advocate for balance between the prophetic and the wisdom traditions. This moves Jesus away from a central position. Brenneman suggests that a balance is needed between "selective nonparticipation" (Exodus, the Prophets, and Jesus) and "selective participation" (the orders of creation and Wisdom traditions) (3). While he does not likely want to surrender the centrality of Christ for the Christian,[32] by creating these two camps and then placing Jesus squarely into the one, it seems that participation in the Wisdom tradition is non-participation in Christ's mission. This creates the false dichotomy of participating either in Wisdom, where Christ apparently is not, or in the "prophetic dissenting" camp, where Christ's mission and message are central.

This is problematic, not only because of the implication that the "prophetic dissenter" does not participate in wisdom, but because Jesus himself, the "dissenter," is portrayed in scripture as Wisdom incarnate. "Jesus is not only the wisdom teacher 'greater than Solomon' (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31); he is Wisdom personified."[33] In 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16 the Apostle Paul rejects the "wisdom of the wise" and the "wisdom of the world," and holds up the "mystery" and the "foolishness" of Christ and his cross. Not only does Paul rebuke those who believe they are in possession of truth and wisdom,[34] he declares, in true OT fashion, that God's ultimate intentions can be made known only through God's self-revelation, and that this revelation has been granted to believers in Jesus Christ, God's personified Wisdom.[35]

The wisdom tradition can play an important role in providing practical guidance for living the Christian life. However, Brenneman's logic depicts wisdom as equated with the possession and logic of power and privilege. That is, we turn to "wisdom" in order to learn how to live with power when we no longer have to live on the margins. This is unfortunate, as profound wisdom also arises from the margins.

Brenneman further suggests that "wisdom" is important as a counter-balance to the "prophetic dissenting" tradition. His plea to engage wisdom as a counter-balance is for his audience to get involved in the highest levels of national and international communities, even as heads of governmental and non-governmental agencies (3). Wisdom thus seems to be a way for those who are a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition to integrate faithful lives with power and authority. However, Walter Klaassen reminds us that people "are easily seduced into thinking that getting into the seat of power means disaster will be averted. It is an old fallacy to assume that a basic change takes place in society when Christians take over the reins of power. But as long as the old rules of the use of power continue to operate in our society, even a Christian will not be able to accomplish basic changes."[36]

Are voices that reveal and strive for the embodiment of an alternative kingdom, an alternative community, dissenting or not? Are those who proclaim, participate in, demonstrate, and invite others into this alternative kingdom "naysayers"? Or are they affirming and pointing to other options that strive for peace, seek justice, provide hope, and offer salvation?

Yoder was not interested in simply saying "no" to different ways of

being engaged with the world, thereby functioning as purity police with regard to Mennonite theology, identity, and ethics. Rather, he wanted to move past the often-relied-upon dualism that plagues ethical enquiry and theology in general. He was interested in finding an alternative way – a way often overlooked, forgotten, or ignored. A third way provides many exciting, creative, and new forms of being in our world, engaging it in an alternative manner that may look naïve, useless, powerless, foolish, or even a waste of time. Yet, the biblical story points to many examples that demonstrate the radicality of an alternative kingdom. This kingdom is exhibited through "a royal waste of time"[37] as Jesus and his disciples sat and ate together; it is demonstrated through the humility of being a servant, not a master, and through the ultimate inefficient means of death, and not just any death but death on a cross. It is this foolish, inefficient, and ineffective death that disarms the principalities and powers (Col. 2:15). Although this third way is often very different and seemingly naïve, it cannot be said that these options are merely ways of saying "no." Rather, they proclaim a resounding "yes," albeit not in the usual pattern.

It is not the "no's" of Bender and Yoder that are important but the "yes" proposals they make. To see Yoder as a naysayer is to misunderstand and misread him. If one were to make a list of the "no's," it would only be fair to also identify the "yeses" given by the prophetic voices – and there are many.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite Movement

Brenneman argues that today's dissenting voices that have led to a "culture of dissent" in Goshen College emerge naturally from its historic Mennonite/Anabaptist roots and those labeled as "radical dissenters," "sectarian naysayers," and "prophetic nonconformists" (1). Mennonites and Anabaptists were, he argues, idealists and perfectionists who considered compromise as sinful. "Unfortunately, because so many of them were silenced and killed during those early years, they never really had the opportunity to develop a model for social and political life together that might actually have played out in the world of nations and cultures where compromise can be a positive norm" (1).

Brenneman's reasoning here is the same as that used to circumvent

taking Jesus' ethical life and teachings seriously as a model for radical ethical and political action, though in this case the comment does not relate to the social life of Jesus but to the social and political life of the Mennonite/Anabaptist movement.[38] The assumption often made is that Jesus' ethic was meant to be an "interim" ethic, making Jesus' life and teachings impractical or superfluous for the complicated structures of modern society. "His ethical teachings therefore appropriately pay no attention to society's need for survival and for the patient construction of permanent institutions," Yoder does himself say, adding that "[t]he rejection of violence, of self-defense, and of accumulating wealth for the sake of security, and the footlooseness of the prophet of the kingdom are not permanent and generalizable attitudes toward social values."[39] But throughout the rest of *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder demonstrates how the social and political ethic taught and demonstrated by Jesus is one who not only should be taken seriously but requires a new understanding as to how Christians participate in the world.

I do not assume that Mennonites/Anabaptists are the logical continuation of the life that Jesus taught and demonstrated, but I do contend that Brenneman uses the troubling logic noted above and thus cannot adequately account for the radical lives of the early Anabaptists. He assumes that their life after the 16th century was not intentional about its social and political way of being. According to him, the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement and tradition (a tradition approaching 500 years!) has failed to model a social and political life that would be noticed in the world of nations (1). This assessment assumes that (a) the manner in which the Anabaptist tradition carried on even after "so many of them were silenced and killed during those early years" failed to provide a particular and coherent way of being (Brenneman assumes that if those martyred had not been killed, they would have made compromises in order to develop their social and political life), and (b) the Anabaptist tradition did not provide a model or example of social and political life, participation, and being. These assumptions imply an *a priori* view of what it means to participate in the social and political realm, and that because Anabaptists did not participate in this preconceived way, they did not provide a suitable model or example.

However, we can view the story of the Anabaptists from another perspective, not as members of a tradition that failed to provide a model

for social and political life but as a community that sought to provide an alternative way of being socially and politically relevant – and in many ways succeeded in doing so. "They were concerned to follow Jesus and to do that in the religious, social and political sphere."[40] They sought to live a life focused on and shaped by Jesus within a community of believers. This was and continues to be a model for social and political life; many people find it appealing and inspirational because it provides an alternative reality. Many are drawn to Anabaptism precisely because of its particular social and political witness. This can be seen in England, South Africa, Chile, Cuba, Indonesia, and other places.

Brenneman's argument undervalues the life that so many early Anabaptists died for precisely because they were living out their social and political models, and it fails to value the radical lives that demonstrate this alternative today. It is not that the early Anabaptists could not develop a model for social and political life which might have played out in the world of nations because they died; they died because they lived and provided an alternative model of social, ecclesial, and political life. It is in fact a way of life that many around the world find appealing and are interested in learning from.[41] Indeed, it is being noticed in the world of nations.

Conclusion

There are other points in Brenneman's sermon that could be addressed. One wonders, for example, what the role of the church is in the "new school of thought." This seems important, since Goshen College will be educating and shaping future leaders of the church.[42] Brenneman refers to the role of the church only once. In this reference, it is mentioned simply as a benefactor, receiving the gift of a trained and presumably "responsible" person who possesses the College's "new school of thought."

It is not easy to provide leadership for a school. Difficult and foundational decisions in terms of the institution's direction and shape must be made. Creating a vision is exciting, because it determines what the future will look like, what kind of students the school will attract and how they will be shaped, what influence the school will have on the community and society at large, and ultimately how the school will seek to witness to the already present, but not yet fully fulfilled, kingdom of God. A "new school

of thought" creates a new vision. Ironically, while Brenneman intends to create a new school of yea-sayers, he does so by "just saying 'No!'" to the history and legacy at Goshen College, a legacy that he believes needs to be challenged and changed. He too moves away from something in order to present a new option. Just as surely as he is saying yes to something, he also is saying no to something else. This is not unlike Yoder and the early Anabaptists.

Given all we have analyzed, it seems that Brenneman has not identified a compelling analysis of the causes of Goshen College's "culture of dissent." Nor has he portrayed Yoder fairly by identifying him as the College's greatest advocate and facilitator of this culture. His reading of Yoder is partial at best.[43]

In being the church, the proclamation, embodiment, and witness of the kingdom of God on earth, the "no's" are not the central message in its alternative being and witness. The view of the church as a "no" community arises from a long history where the Bible is depicted as a manual of what people should or should not do. This view fails to identify, proclaim, and witness to the "yeses" that distinguish those who believe and live differently. To focus on the "no's" of the Bible, Jesus, and the church is to miss the point of the wonderful, awe-inspiring, creative, and redeeming work God has done, and is continuing to do, on earth. This is work we are called to notice and invited to participate in as agents of God's reconciling peace and justice in God's larger movement – to be an alternative presence and community in a fallen world. "The church is meant to be an alternative community, subverting the values of our dominant society with kingdom of God priorities."[44]

Yoder's theology and work was not simply that of "radical dissent" but was rather a radical voice for a way of life that prioritized how the church can be a real, alternative community that acknowledges its distinctiveness when it proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and worships this Lamb that was slain.[45] Yoder's message, therefore, does not say "No!" but proclaims a most radical and alternative "Yes!"

Notes

[1] Goshen College, a liberal arts college affiliated with Mennonite Church USA, is located in Goshen, Indiana. See http://www.goshen.edu/ for more information.
[2] News release from Goshen College, "President Brenneman releases statement as national anthem is played on campus," March 23, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-23-10-game-day440.html. For the sermon, go to http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/01-20-10-brenneman-chapel394.html.
[3] For example, critics were asking if the hospitality sought through playing the anthem is consistent with the kind of hospitality demonstrated by Jesus as he interacted with culture and the powers during his life. While questions of policy and direction for an educational institution are not my primary interest, I suspect that in wrestling with the theological issues of Christ and culture, tradition and inclusion, dissent and hospitality, some direction for policies may emerge.
[4] Until the board's reversal of its decision, Brenneman's sermon was used, highlighted and referenced as an authoritative source in explaining the decision to play the national anthem. See, for example, "Goshen College Alumni Executive Board releases statement on national anthem decision," news release by Goshen College, March 11, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-11-10-alumni-anthem431.html. Brenneman's sermon is also highlighted as a key resource that provides insights into the "broader context" of the national anthem debate. See "National Anthem Decision Background," http://www.goshen.edu/anthem/background/, accessed May 31, 2011.
[5] Brenneman refers to Gerald Schlabach's forthcoming memoir, which describes Goshen College's distinct school of thought as a "culture of dissent."
[6] For interesting notes on Yoder's use of the phrase "social irresponsibility," see Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 147-48.
[7] Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 196. See also Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 97-113, and Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 18-19. Note that Carter runs into the trap of recognizing Yoder's ad hoc, non-systematized approach and tries to systematize it for Yoder (see Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 107).
[8] Huebner, *A Precarious Peace,* 101.
[9] Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 147-48.
[10] John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 36.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.
[16] Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 164.
[17] Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 57-58; emphasis in original. Mark Thiessen Nation rightly notes that "Yoder has framed these reflections to counter the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr" in *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 164. However, Yoder's words seem to speak almost directly to Brenneman and the argument he puts forward, demonstrating the overwhelming similarity between Brenneman's line of reasoning and Reinhold Niebuhr's.
[18] For example, this view of "responsibility" provided an exciting new avenue for people in South Africa who were struggling against apartheid. Yoder's theology provided fresh imagination as to how to respond to mandatory military service along with other ways of struggling against apartheid and towards justice for all.
[19] See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), for the distinction between "peripheral" and "central" prophets, where the former denotes those outside of the royal court (e.g., Elijah) and the latter those with access to or from part of the monarchic circle (e.g., Nathan). Though this would require a broader study, it could be argued that Yoder tends to focus on and favor peripheral prophets. I thank W. Derek Suderman for alerting me to Wilson's work and making this observation regarding Yoder in private communication.
[20] John C. Nugent, "The Politics of YHWH: John Howard Yoder's Old Testament Narration and its Implications for Social Ethics," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39.1 (2010): 71-99.
[21] Ibid., 75.
[22] Ibid., 74.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 75.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 79; quoting John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1971), 28.
[27] Ibid., 88.
[28] Ibid., 85.
[29] Robert J. Suderman et al., "Jesus and the Church" in *Jesus Matters: Good News for the 21st Century,* ed. James R. Krabill and David W. Shenk (Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009), 210.
[30] Nugent, "The Politics of YHWH," 88.
[31] Ibid.
[32] A suspicion that has been validated in a recent *Bulletin: The Magazine of Goshen College* (Fall/Winter 2010) that published e-mail correspondence between Jim Brenneman and Shane Claiborne, which demonstrated Brenneman's desire to maintain Christ-centeredness in who we are as Christians.
[33] Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 195.

[34] Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 28.
[35] Ibid., 196.
[36] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973), 81.
[37] This phrase is borrowed from Marva J. Dawn's *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
[38] See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, 63.
[41] This is not to encourage a positivistic reading of Anabaptist history. Rather it is to recognize the lives that have been shaped by the Anabaptist tradition and the people who have lived according to this radical lifestyle since the birth of Anabaptism.
[42] Given that Goshen College is affiliated with Mennonite Church USA and supported by its Mennonite constituency, and that the College will be educating, training, and shaping future church leaders of the Mennonite faith, it would be interesting to know what involvement the Mennonite church has on how these leaders are educated and shaped.
[43] It might also be said that Brenneman's reading of Yoder is built on the perspective of others such as Rodney Sawatsky, who states: "For one thing, particularly under the tutelage of John Howard Yoder, 'irresponsibility' became a virtue." (Rodney J. Sawatsky, "J. Lawrence Burkholder: Sectarian Realist," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, 2nd ed. [Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1996], 66).
[44] Robert J. Suderman et al., "Jesus and the Church," 210.
[45] John Howard Yoder, "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World" in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998), 128-40.

Andrew Suderman is a Witness Worker of Mennonite Church Canada living in South Africa, where he is the Director of the Anabaptist Network in South Africa.