Patience as Hermeneutical Practice:
Christ, Church, and Scripture in John Howard Yoder and Hans Frei

Nathan Hershberger
Harrisonburg, Virginia

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Table of Contents

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"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road,
while he was opening the Scriptures to us?[1]"

What does it mean to read with patience? How do Christians read Scripture patiently? What sorts of community and friendship produce patient readers? How do patient practices of reading become impatient, and vice versa? What is patience? Can reading be cross-shaped? In what follows, I attempt to trace these questions out by exploring the work of John Howard Yoder and Hans Frei. While in many ways an unlikely pairing, Yoder and Frei can be helpfully viewed as working on parallel arms of a shared quest—the cultivation of more attentive and self-critical readings of Scripture in Christian communities. It is in the search for such vulnerability before the witness of Scripture that this essay finds its place, for I am convinced that patient reading, whatever it may be, is bound up with the repentance and attentiveness to suffering necessary for the church's continued existence "during the world."[2]

For his part, Yoder not only articulated the biblical and Christological warrant for the particular political character of the Christian church, but also argued that this character—vulnerable, egalitarian—was necessary if the church was to read its Scriptures well, that is, to be challenged by its reading. Hans Frei, on the other hand, called Christian communities to reading postures more attentive to the genres emerging from the biblical narratives themselves, and away from frames of meaning "behind" those narratives.

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[1] Luke 24:32. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
[2] The phrase is Charles Mathewes' and is closely related to his claim that (rephrasing Franz Rosenzweig) "Christianity is best understood as providing a structure to our passion and suffering, not a solution to it." Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15.

I contend, following the work of Yoder especially, that Christian reading, if shaped by the cross and resurrection of Christ, is patient—a patience that consists in openness to the strange, continuing work of God in the words of Scripture. In the following pages, I trace this theme through Yoder's ecclesiology and exegetical practice, Frei's historiography, hermeneutics, and Christology and end with a reading of a resurrection encounter in the gospel of Luke. Yoder's reading of the New Testament and his articulation of the role of Scripture in the reform of church communities will serve as the springboard for my account of patience. But Yoder's ecclesially-focused readings of Scripture test the limits of the patience I find in his work. Next, Frei provides not only a helpful historical analysis that clarifies the difficulties in Yoder, but also an account of the presence of Christ to the reader that thickens and broadens Yoder's emphasis on discipleship as integral to the interpretation of Scripture. In pursuit of the hermeneutic identified by Yoder and clarified by Frei, I conclude these pages with a reading of the Emmaus road story from the Gospel of Luke in order to articulate a way Christian communities might understand the presence of Christ to Scripture, and to their reading of it. The purpose of this final reflection—and this work as a whole—will not be to demonstrate the results of a "correct," or "purely" patient hermeneutic, but rather to explore, complicate, and gesture towards what it might mean for the reading habits of Christian communities to be formed by the cross and resurrection of Christ. To be patient in this way, after this example, is not to *possess* a certain virtue, much less a certain method, but to be constantly engaged in—as Chris Huebner has argued—a series of *dis*possessions, a readiness to be challenged, overruled, and judged by the many words of Scripture as they point to that one "Word of truth so exceedingly strange that we nailed it to the cross."[3]

[3] Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace, Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity*, (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2006), 17.

Part I

Facing the Cross: The Challenge of Yoder's Reading

> "The real issue is not whether Jesus can make sense in a world far from Galilee, but whether—when he meets us in our world, as he does in fact—we want to follow him. We don't have to, as they didn't then. That we don't have to is the profoundest proof of his condescension, and thereby of his glory."[4]

John Howard Yoder's wide-ranging and voluminous work is perhaps best summarized as confronting North American Christianity with the community-forming significance of the cross of Christ. Especially in his best-read work, *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder sought to render the church more vulnerably accountable to the social reality of Jesus' cross and resurrection. This message of reform was itself embedded in Yoder's conviction that Scripture, read by outsiders and insiders, speaks afresh to each new age of the church in calling the people of God to faithfulness to the Word of God. This posture of patience, which Yoder called "radical reformation," is itself cruciform insofar as it waits for and submits to the action of the God who raised Jesus from the dead. However, in his exegetical reflection on the cruciform shape of the life of the church, Yoder tended to state the meaning of Scripture through the shared logic he discerned behind particular passages, logics that always pointed toward the kind of community for which he advocated. This style limited the confrontational liveliness of Scripture in Yoder's hands even as he sought to render the church more open to its challenge. Those seeking to further the great gifts of insight that Yoder has given ought to look for ways to maintain the clarity of Yoder's commitment to shaping the life of the church around the witness of Scripture, as unified in the life of Christ, without eclipsing the immediacy of that witness.

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[4] Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," *The Priestly Kingdom*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984, 2001), 39.

Yoder declares, at the beginning of his *The Politics of Jesus* that his primary intent was to summarize biblical scholarship so as to "let the Jesus story so speak that the person concerned with social ethics, as accustomed as such a person is to a set of standard ways to assume Jesus not to be relevant to social issues, or at least not relevant *immediately*, can hear."[5] While neither Yoder's supporters nor his detractors have agreed with him that *The Politics of Jesus* merely summarized, his assertion that his work attempts to "let the Jesus story…speak" seems an appropriate, and weighty, apprehension. Throughout his work, Yoder attempted to clarify in various ways his contention that the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus ought to concretely shape the shared life, and thus the "politics," of those who witness to him. "It is quite possible to refuse to accept Jesus as normative; but it is not possible on the basis of the record to declare him irrelevant."[6]

Yoder proposed specific ways in which the cross might so shape the church. First and foremost, his defense of pacifism and his engagement with just war theory exemplified his conviction that the suffering love with which Christ triumphed over death and sin ought also to characterize the life of the church—because the victory assured the church is so promised only through God's work in the resurrection, and not by the sword-wielding followers of Christ. Culminating in his *Body Politics*, Yoder also proposed that the central practices of the early church, including most centrally baptism and the Lord's Supper, had lost their political reality—in this case inter-ethnic inclusion and economic sharing, respectively. Many other topics, including various aspect of church history, biblical studies, epistemology, missiology, the history of Jewish-Christian division, fell under Yoder's view and were all shaped decisively by his understanding of the work of God in Christ's life, cross, and resurrection.

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[5] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994), 2. Emphasis original.
[6] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 97.

The patience of such a community, I want to suggest, names the style of witness called forth by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. One central passage in Yoder's work for the purposes of articulating this "patience" comes in "The War of the Lamb," the final chapter of *The Politics of Jesus.* There, in reflecting on the book of Revelation, Yoder argues that a key human propensity for sin consists in attempts to envision the desired future of humanity, and to get there by any means necessary. He states,

> Christians in our age are obsessed with the meaning and direction of history. Social ethical concern is moved by a deep desire to make things move in the right direction. Whether a given action is right or not seems to be inseparable from the question of what effects it will cause. Thus part if not all of social concern has to do with looking for the right 'handle' by which one can 'get a hold on' the course of history and move it in the right direction.[7]

What Yoder rejects is not the human capacity for planning, but the human tendency to reify those plans into the image of human progress, and to measure success by progress on those lines, whatever the cost. The rejection of "governing history" distinguishes Yoder's pacifism from strategic kinds of pacifism

> which would say that it is wrong to kill but that with proper nonviolent techniques you can obtain without killing everything you really want….What Jesus renounced is not first of all violence, but rather the compulsiveness of purpose that leads the strong to violate the dignity of others. The point is not that one can obtain all of one's legitimate ends without using violent means. It is rather that our readiness to renounce our legitimate ends whenever they cannot be attained by legitimate means itself constitutes our participation in the triumphant suffering of the Lamb.[8]

This rejection of domination—including domination for the good—is not some high-handed withdrawal, but is grounded in the concrete victory already won by Christ's cross and resurrection. Yoder maintains, in reflecting on John's vision of the disfigured Lamb receiving glory and power, that "the key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but

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[7] Yoder, *Politics*, 228.

[8] Ibid., 237. Note that Yoder is not renouncing nonviolent direct action, but certain kinds of motivation and ideology behind certain kinds of coercive and abusive nonviolent direction actions.

their patience.... The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect, but one of cross and resurrection."[9] This is perhaps the most quoted single line of Yoder's work, and can rightly be seen as its most fitting summary.

Patience of this sort is also closely related to the virtue prized by 16th century Anabaptists, "*Gelassenheit,"* often rendered "yieldedness." Yoder ties this distinctive up with similar emphases in other traditions. "What the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century called *Gelassenheit*, or what the early Dunkards called *perfect love*, or what frontier farmer preachers of the nineteenth century called *humility* or what their Wesleyan contemporaries called *sanctification*, represent closely related but distinguishable labels for the view of human dignity that frees the believer from temptations to feel called to set the world right by force."[10] This patience that yields has several edges. It is—perhaps first—a simple obedience to the words of Scripture, the obedience that is the beginning and end of Christological pacifism. It is also yieldedness to the community of faith, a willingness to submit rather than fight, and to be rejected rather than leave, as schismatics. Thus, this kind of yieldedness both *acts*, responding to the commands of God in Christ, in Scripture, and *waits*, open to correction and the judging force of God's new word coming out of Scripture.

While Yoder did not speak as centrally of patience as my summary thus far makes it out to be, this virtue has featured prominently in a certain stream of scholarship after Yoder. It has become a way of summarizing Yoder's Christological pacifism as it relates to epistemology. In the words of Chris Huebner, "The peace of Christ…cannot finally be secured. Rather peace can

[9] Ibid., 232.
[10] Yoder, *The War of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 106

only be given by way of witness."[11] "Patience" is thus an epistemology of "dialogical vulnerability" that, precisely in its vulnerability, signifies the kingdom of God glimpsed in the crucified and risen Jesus.

Such patience does not shy away from conflict, or even from measured confidence in its readings of Scripture, and history. Indeed, as Huebner states, it consists, too, in an "active pursuit of conflict in the sense of being willing to engage in self-criticism."[12] That is, false humility that loudly does nothing but proclaim its own fallibility and uncertainty is not patience, but rather just another attempt to find a method that will secure its position.[13] "By contrast, the epistemological virtue of patience is part of a concerted attempt to refuse such reductive strategies and to embody a counter-epistemology as an alternative to that of the wider world."[14] Huebner's account of martyrdom as a sign shows what this patience looks like in the face of certain kinds of opposition even (or especially?) because of the ambiguities of martyrdom for Western Christians after Christendom and colonialism. Martyrdom, he argues, "is but an expression of a way of life that gives up the assumption of being in control." It is not "*evidence* of the truth" but rather "a practice that constitutes and makes intelligible a certain kind of knowledge."[15] This flows from Yoder's conviction that "to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord makes it inconceivable that there should be any realm where his writ would not run. That authority, however, is not coercive but nonviolent; it cannot be imposed, only offered."[16]

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[11] Huebner, *Precarious Peace,* 112
[12] Huebner 111.
[13] In one of the last essays of his life, Yoder, sounding a bit tired of critics calling his position "absolutist," described the benefits of (from the title of the paper) "Patience as Method in Moral Reasoning." It is from that title, and from the "patience" taken up, in turn, by Huebner and others, that this paper takes its title.
[14] Huebner, *Precarious Peace,* 111.
[15] Huebner, "The Agony of the Truth: Martyrdom, Violence, and Christian Ways of Knowing" in *Precarious Peace,* 137. Emphasis mine. See also his "Between Victory and Victimhood: Reflections on Martyrdom, Culture, and Identity" in the same volume. Huebner draws on Rowan Williams' excellent discussion of the lure and the promise of martyrdom in Williams' *Resurrection* and *Christ on Trial*.
[16] Yoder, For the Nations, 25.

The patience I am after, then, the patience to which Yoder points, and the patience which I believe is key to the integrity of the church, is a patience that waits, that is able to take time to accept challenge and to witness, because the victory of the truth is not in its hands. It also acts, in time, obedient to that victory. What such a patience looks like, hermeneutically, will, I hope, be articulated, challenged, reformed, and emerge, somewhat expanded and somewhat diminished, as I dwell in the writings of Yoder and Frei, and in the words of Scripture, through the rest of this essay.

"More Light and Truth": Scripture in the Ever-Reforming Church

Yoder situated his calls for the church to face and embrace the politics of Jesus within an ecumenical posture he called "radical reformation," constituted essentially by a perpetual openness of the Christian community to the normative judgments of Scripture upon the sins of the church in the present. Though the witness of Scripture, and especially the witness of the early church of the New Testament, functioned strongly in Yoder's work as a normative model of Christian community, the goal of his posture of reform was not to recreate or repristinate that community, but rather to allow the continued encounter with the death and resurrection of Jesus to renew, revive, and reform the present life of the church.

Yoder cautioned that history needed constantly to be retold, so as to free ourselves from the shackles of present ideology, and to encounter once again, the reforming possibility of a strange past other to ourselves, paradigmatically in Scripture. This position was intimately related to his convictions about Christological nonviolence. "A nonviolent revisioning of events, especially of the events of empire, is…not moved by kneejerk contrariness but by reverence for the events in their thereness, and by a growing modesty about how our grids need to be

challenged."[17] This task of remembering and reform, while resistant to our "determinism" and our "grids" will, Yoder firmly maintains, have a certain quality of similarity, which can only be summarized as Christological. "Jesus, who continued that chain and brought it to a first perfection, is the same now and tomorrow, as yesterday. The ministry of remembrance, which is the task of the historian, is thus at heart a Christological task. Its vocation is to trace the sameness of Jesus across the generations."[18]

A central premise vitalizing Yoder's hermeneutic, and indeed his whole position, is the confession that the church is constantly in need of reform. In his essay "The Authority of Tradition" Yoder articulates the posture of radical reformation, saying, "We are not plagued merely by a hard-to-manage diversity….We are faced with error….To denounce those errors we must appeal to the common traditions from which those who fall into error are falling away."[19] Yet Scripture, in Yoder's terms, does not diagnose all possible error, but simply exists as witness to the origins of the community, continued engagement with which will, by the Spirit, aid the church in discerning the contours of faithfulness in a given age. "The most important operational meaning of the Bible for ethics is not that we do just what it says in some way that we can derive deductively. It is rather that we are able, thanks to the combined gifts of teachers and prophets, to become aware that we do not do what it says, and that the dissonance we thereby create enables our renewal."[20] Thus the growth of the Christian tradition is not a story of triumph, but of continued attempts at self-correction, and continued confession of sin and error.

> Far from being an ongoing growth like a tree, the wholesome growth of a tradition is like a vine: a story of constant interruption of organic growth in favor

[17] Yoder, "The Burden and Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism" in *Nonviolent America* ed.Louis Hawkley and Jim Juhnke (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1993), 29.
[18] Yoder, "Historiography as a Ministry to Renewal," *Brethren Life and Thought* 42/3,4 (1997): 216.
[19] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 69.
[20] Ibid., 70. "He also states, Scripture comes on the scene not as a receptacle of all possible inspired truth, but rather as witness to the historical baseline of the communities' origins and thereby as link to the historicity of their Lord's past presence." 69.

> of pruning and a new chance for the roots. This renewed appeal to origins is not primitivism, nor an effort to capture some pristine purity. It is rather a 'looping back'…a rediscovery of something from the past whose pertinence was not seen before, because only a new question or challenge enables us to see it speaking to us.[21]

Yoder's program is well captured by the reformation slogan *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (church reformed, always reforming). Yet the need for correction is not in itself something to be mourned, rather our "claim to bypass that need, as if our link to our origins were already in our own hands" is the problem. So the slogan, for Yoder's project, might be better rendered simply *ecclesia semper reformanda*, for this action of reform is the very definition of the life of the church from the beginning.

> What we…find at the heart of our tradition is not some proposition, Scriptural or promulgated otherwise, which we hold to be authoritative and to be exempted from the relativity of hermeneutical debate by virtue of its inspiredness. What we find at the origin is already a process of reaching back again to the origins, to the earliest memories of the event itself, confident that that testimony, however intimately integrated with the belief of the witnesses, is not a wax nose, and will serve to illuminate and sometimes adjudicate our present path.[22]

Further, the guidance that Scripture gives cannot always be specified in advance, but arrives as particular contexts and particular questions, and the movement of the Spirit, elicit new answers from its norming witness. "A new question permits the old event to respond in ways that earlier patterns of questioning had not made self-evident or perhaps had hidden."[23] The fresh answers were always there in the texts, Yoder insists, but are only fresh because of a transformed capacity for hearing. He suggests that just as "there have always been radio waves brining messages to us from distant stars" and "only the development of radio technology has allowed us to receive those signals" so too –in reference to the renewing force of liberation

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[21] Ibid. 69.
[22] Ibid., 70.
[23] Ibid.

theology—"the Bible was always a liberation storybook: now we are ready to read it that way."[24] Yoder maintains that the Bible is not "a systematized compendium of final answers, to be applied with compelling deductive logic to all future settings," but rather "a repertory of more or less pertinent paradigms, needing to be selected and transformed trans-culturally in ever new settings."[25] This sense of flexible contextual transposition is part of what Yoder means when he says, quite frequently in his essays dealing with Scripture, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word."[26]

It follows from all this that Scripture, for Yoder, only comes to have meaning in a community of believers, and indeed, that Scripture and the community of believers require and presuppose one another. In an essay on "binding and loosing" based on Jesus' injunctions about communal discernment and reconciliation in the eighteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew 18, Yoder states,

> To speak of the Bible apart from people reading it and apart from the specific questions those people reading need to answer is to do violence to the very purpose for which we have been given the Holy Scriptures. There is no such thing as an isolated word of the Bible carrying meaning in itself. It has meaning only when it is read by someone and then only when that reader and the society in which he or she lives can understand the issue to which it speaks.[27]

Moreover, the interpretation of Scripture cannot rightly take place outside of the context of discipleship in the way of Christ, for Yoder. Hans Denck, a 16th century Anabaptist leader

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[24] Ibid., 71. "Tomorrow some other question will provoke another 'reaching back' for yet another lever of meaning that was always there."

[25] John Howard Yoder, "Is Not His Word Like a Fire? The Bible and Civil Turmoil" in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 92. This essay also appears in Yoder's *To Hear the Word*.

[26] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 88. Quoting John Robinson, Puritan minister, in a farewell address to the crew of the Mayflower, 1620.

[27] John Howard Yoder, "Binding and Loosing" in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 353. Mark Thiessen Nation discusses the similarities between Yoder's approach here and Stanley Fish's account of texts, communities of reading, and reader-response theory in "Theology as Witness: Reflections on Yoder, Fish, and Interpretive Communities," *Faith and Freedom*, 5:1-2 (1996): 42-47.

summarized and defined this key principal of Anabaptist hermeneutics, writing, "No man can know Christ unless he follows after him in life," and Yoder understood this maxim to apply to the interpretation of Scripture in the gathered community.[28] Christ Huebner, in an illuminating essay on Yoder and the narrative and postliberal hermeneutics of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, states, summarizing Yoder, that "the reading of Scripture is a disciplined activity, according to which readers must have been properly initiated by receiving prior training in the particular practices of the church, such as binding and loosing, or that of breaking bread."[29]

It would be a mistake, however, to think of discipleship as a possession of the church imparted to individuals as training. Rather, discipleship most broadly understood is something the whole church does together as its corporate life comes to reflect—already, but not yet in full—the life of the Kingdom of God to which the whole world is now called after the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Yoder says, "The question, 'How does Scripture work to order and re-order?' is transmuted into the question, 'what shape ought the believing community to have, in order for the Word thus to work?'"[30] The articulation of that shape was Yoder's life's work, but he attended most carefully to this specific question in his essay "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood." The thrust of the essay is to establish that moral discernment is the prerogative of the entire gathered community, and that this shape is visible in the New Testament. The "open process" in which the gifts of all are included, according to 1 Corinthians 14, is central, for according to Yoder, "God speaks where his people gather and are free to be led. The marks of the validity of the conclusions they reach are to be sought not alone in the principles applied but in the procedure of the meeting. Were all free to speak? Was every speech heard and weighed?

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[28] Quoted by Yoder in "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" in *To Hear The Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 236.
[29] Christ Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 61.
[30] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 92.

Did the prophets grant their need to undergo interpretation?"[31] This is the kind of community about which Yoder says at the same time, "it would need to be a community whose very self-definition is its corporate aptness for the hermeneutical task" *and* "it would need to be a community committed to the ministry of firstfruits, prefiguring in its one life the kingdom…"[32]

All this, however, does not privilege the church over Scripture, but rather reorients both as mutually constitutive. As Chris Huebner has summarized, "Yoder takes church and Scripture to be fundamentally interdependent" for the church cannot, as has been noted, escape from the judgment of Scripture.[33] Because of this, the church can never escape the possibility that Scripture might speak a word of conviction through those outside the church community. Indeed, while the distinction between church and world is crucial for Yoder, the boundaries between insiders and insiders are inherently unstable. At the end of his essay "Is Not His Word Like Fire," after noting how the interpretation of Scripture is the task of the whole church, together, and not a matter only for elites, Yoder states

> This hermeneutic role of the community is thus primordial; i.e. we have to talk about it first. It is however-by no means an exclusive possession…When the empirical community becomes disobedient, other people can hear the Bible's witness too. It is after all a public document. Loners and outsiders can hear it speaking, especially if the insiders have ceased to listen. It was thanks to the loner Tolstoy and the outsider Gandhi that the churchman Martin Luther King, Jr....was able to bring Jesus' word on violence back into the churches. It was partly the outsider Marx who enabled liberation theologians to restate what the Law and the Prophets had been saying for centuries, largely unheard, about God's partisanship for the poor.[34]

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[31] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984, 2001), 22-3. "At all your meetings, let everyone be ready with a Psalm or a sermon or a revelation…As for prophets, let two or three others speak, and the others attend to them." I Corinthians 14:26, 29. Quoted by Yoder, 22.
[32] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 92.
[33] Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 62.
[34] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 93.

Openness to outsiders is not merely a civil thing for the believing community to aim for, but in fact constitutive of its very faithfulness.[35]

A contemporary example of this dynamic in which strangers call the churches back to faithful living flowing from Scripture, might be the recent intensification of calls for debt relief in the wake of the Occupy movements around the world. These calls have taken form into at least one organization, called "Rolling Jubilee" which collects small-scale donations, buys bundled packages of private debt from collection agencies, and forgives the debt. While religious organization in North America have called for global debt relief since the 1970s, "Rolling Jubilee" is unique in that its focus is on the relief of private debt in the United States, that it directly acts to that end, and that it is explicitly non-religious (though hospitable to religion). However, the secular origins of "Rolling Jubilee" have not prevented it from inscribing—in its very name—the biblical prescription for regular debt forgiveness and restoration of original ownership that takes shape in the life of the people Israel in the land of Israel. "Rolling Jubilee" might be construed as a call from outsiders who can nonetheless "hear the Bible's witness" after the "insiders have ceased to listen" and so to restate, in a new way, "what the Law and the Prophets had been saying for centuries, largely unheard, about God's partisanship for the poor" so as to call the community of the (un)faithful back to faithfulness—in this case, also to a re-appropriation of the language of "usury" and its Scriptural prohibition.

Indeed, the "Strike Debt Organizing Kit," a manual for activists in debt abolishment campaigns published by "Rolling Jubilee," describes part of its work as the renewal of faith communities through re-encounter with forgotten Scriptures. An "Outreach Case Study" on "Religious Communities" suggests that while "idea of the jubilee, for instance, originates in

[35] For more on this dynamic, see Romand Coles, "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder: 'Outsiders' and the 'Otherness' of the Church," *Modern Theology* 18/3 (2002).

ancient Israelite law as a divinely-ordained, periodic forgiveness of debts" and indeed that "from their origins, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have each denounced the sin of usury" activists should not " expect that members themselves will be [conscious of this history]."[36] The last words of this section in the handbook are persistently hopeful.

> Someday, the language of usury may come back into use, and modern usurers will have to face the shame of their congregations. But getting there will not be easy, requiring learned and prophetic voices within religious communities to articulate it for themselves. In the meantime, with practical tools and our solidarity, we can help equip these communities to drive the predatory lenders from their temples and spread the spirit of jubilee.[37]

The clear positioning of the author as an outsider jars intriguingly with the echoes her phrasing calls forth from the Gospel accounts of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple in Jerusalem. Certainly the reform of religious communities is not the primary intent of "Rolling Jubilee." Yet it may result in a similar movement of renewal of reading and practice, traced out by Yoder, however incomplete.

Yoder's notion of the radically reformatory character of Scripture read in the believing community might be fruitfully inflected through Ephraim Radner's explorations of the divisions of the church. In *The End of The Church* Radner suggests that the modern fragmentary state of the church might be understood as a figure of and a participation in, the divine abandonment of Christ on the cross. Radner examines the way ministry, sainthood, Eucharist, repentance, and Scripture can exist in such a church, and concludes that each have meaning, in this time, as a way of living into the life of Christ, and only in that way, participating in God's redemption. Thus a church that tastes the Eucharist, which celebrates the unity of the Body of Christ with its Lord, must now taste it as "bitter gall," a judgment on the whole church, which itself is

[36] "Strike Debt Organizing Kit," 8,9. Available at <rollingjubilee.com>
[37] "Strike Debt Organizing Kit," 9.

salvation.[38] So also the witness of Scripture stands as judgment precisely because we are unable to hear it. "Although the Gospel can still be proclaimed, it will speak only to the degree that it is put to the test in describing God's dealings with the Church, and in this description revealing the form of Christ."[39] In all this, "Repentance takes shape only through the apprehension of the single Body, in its historical subjection and adhesion to its Lord's own history."[40] As part of this project, Radner has also emphasized the "intrinsic fallibility of the church" despite the difficulty "Protestants and Catholics both, although for very different reasons" have in admitting it.[41] This calls to mind Yoder's insistence that the church is always in a state of error, and that Scripture works to reform not in a simple interaction of prescription and transgression, but that, as the community is immersed in Scripture, we "become aware that we do not do what it says, and that the dissonance we thereby create enables our renewal."[42] In another work, Radner concludes that the church does not have the time necessary to fix itself and make the changes necessary for it to survive. "We do not have time in our hands—time to make the changes we need to make in order to convert cultures, historical diseases, and so on—but God does." He proceeds, in the same fashion, to note that "we do not have the power" and "we do not have the focused Spirit..." but he concludes "What we have are the forms that tie themselves to God's time and to God's

[38] Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 274. "It is in the realization in oneself of the positive *fruit* of pneumatic abandonment, freely borne, by which one takes into oneself the single bread of bitterness by which the world is saved." Radner's work might be read as one particularly sincere form of Western self-flagellation, but this is to miss not only Radner's treatment of Christianity in the global south, but also the irreducibility and complexity of the cross, for him (the meaning of the cross is not punishment, the meaning of the cross is the cross).
[39] Radner, *The End of the Church*, 53-4.
[40] Ibid., 292.
[41] Radner, "One World or Two?" *Pro Ecclesia* 22/4 (2013): 418. In full: "The world pressing in on Christian Europe—and on its colonizing hopes and realities—has unveiled divine truths about the church that go beyond adjusting social dynamics of intra-Christian post-Reformation concern. These include the church's intrinsic fallibility…They also include the confluence of divine judgment and mercy in ways that have been difficult to engage: judgment upon Western Christian sinfulness of various kinds, and mercy through the reception of the gospel outside of the West in new, unexpected, and paradoxical ways….And of course these new ways themselves are caught up in the fragile web of faithfulness and unfaithfulness that holds the church's life in time." 418. Radner's article is a review of Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*.
[42] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 70.

power and to God's transformation. We have such forms, and whoever we are, and to whatever church we belong, we can submit to them."[43] Radner's call for the church to figure its life into the abandonment of the cross and the hope of the resurrection certainly inflects this hoped-for renewal in a different direction than Yoder does, but his notion of Scripture's negative witness, and even the form of the church's life, finds an echo in Yoder's work to which I will later return.

In sum, Yoder's understanding of the church and Scripture are tied up together in the task of making the Word of God available in the present moment. This task remains ever unfinished because the words of Scripture only have meaning as they come to take shape in the life and discernment of particular churches in particular contexts. In this view, the church must stand ever ready to be judged and challenged by a new word from Scripture, whether in the hands of insiders "loners," or "outsiders."

John Howard Yoder's Reading Habits

However, Yoder's own way of working with Scripture—both his style and the content of his reflections—suggested a finality and an abstraction from the texts that sit uneasily with his commitment to the, patient, persistent reform of the church as Scripture speaks afresh in new situations. Yoder embraced a method of "inductive" reading of Scripture by which he sought to grasp the meaning of Scripture by discerning the shared logic behind certain groups of texts, and the trajectory of that logic in the canon as a whole. This logic always pointed to the emerging social shape of the people of God throughout Scripture. Such a mode of approaching Scripture tends not to permit multiple readings of specific passages since their meaning is bound up in a single determinative reading of the canon as a whole. Scripture, in Yoder's hands, always pointed toward his ecclesiology.

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[43] Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 50. Or, elsewhere, "Ecclesial disunity conforms to a 'body,'….bodies of the dead await not medical specialists, but Creators." Radner, *The End of the Church*, 56.

For those of us who think Yoder's ecclesiology is about right, or at least deadly necessary for churches in the West to hear, this may not seem like such a problem. Yet it cuts against the grain of Yoder's arguments about Scripture as a perennial resource for creative renewal. Yoder's basic exegetical move from Scripture to the trajectory fulfilled in the required politics of the church always comes too quickly, too decisively. Yoder's style and method was not suited to his ends. Patience before Scripture requires waiting.

Several specific observations about Yoder's exegesis flow from this basic complaint. First, I will observe Yoder's self-conscious reflection on method and style and three of Yoder's essays to test my claims about his reading. Yoder's exegetical reflection, I find, was most fruitful the more it used biblical images, centrally the cross, to articulate the logic behind a group of texts, rather than a particular social shape. The unity wrought by the cross, or other biblical images, is a unity both more effective and more resistant to the manipulation of any single interpreter. Somewhat related to this, Yoder's use of sociology, I suggest toward the end of this essay, stems in part from his conviction that the best reading of Scripture is that which most closely approximates the authorial intention and audience reception of the "original" text.

"Biblical Realism" and the Inductive Approach

Yoder's primary mode of interaction with Scripture is to treat portions of Scripture as individual examples, or paradigms, of a model. Much of Yoder's work, whether on the Old or New Testaments consists in demonstrating the coherence and applicability of Scripture by showing how different passages achieve analogous things, and articulating the form of that analogy. Early in his career, Yoder associated his work with "biblical realism," a movement within biblical studies (related to "biblical theology") concerned minimally with the "methodological commitment" that the text "contains a coherent testimony that it is the reader's

task to disengage" and maximally with the assertion that "a 'biblical worldview' once discovered and systematically exposited will have such a timeless coherence that theological change ought to stop."[44] This theological movement was associated with a variety of figures including most prominently among those mentioned by Yoder, Markus Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, Hans Rudi-Weber, and Paul Minear, among others. Far from a naïve attempt to ignore the presuppositions of readers, Yoder argued that "the point is rather that the presuppositions that are brought to a text can become, by virtue of sustained self-critical discipline, increasingly congruent with the intent of the text's author."[45]

While Yoder described "biblical realism" as a "failed school," Yoder developed and inhabited this mode of reading deeply, and described his own hermeneutical method , following from it, as "induction." One of the kinds of validation a text might receive, Yoder wrote in an essay on exegetical method, might be "when separate components…when interpreted each in its own terms, turn out to be parallel in their underlying thought structure, even though quite different in setting, vocabulary, and superficial propositional content."[46] If multiple texts "say in diverse ways what is in some deep structural sense, 'the same thing,' that is the demonstration that said commonality transcends the…texts' diversity."[47] Elsewhere, Yoder summaries further that the Bible provides paradigms, or examples, for the church to internalize and transpose in a new key. "What the culture-critique and culture-creating power of the Bible demonstrates…is a long and rich history, and a generous but finite number of tested paradigms. These may with

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[44] John Howard Yoder, "The Utility of Being Misunderstood," in *To Hear The Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 76, 75. Yoder positioned himself closer to the first maxim, and distanced himself from the notion of an unchanging "biblical worldview."

[45] Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 74.

[46] John Howard Yoder, "Validation By Induction," in *To Hear The Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 142.

[47] Yoder, "Validation By Induction," 142. Yoder states that the two places in which he has most clearly found such patterns occur in his essay "But We Do See Jesus," a reflection on the logic behind different New Testament proclamations of Christ's lordship, and the work which became *Body Politics*, his reflection on the meaning of the Scriptural accounts of practices of the church. 143 n. 2,3.

sensitive analogical reasoning be transposed to other times, other places, even other issues."[48] Yoder's work, then, can be seen, in light of this self-conscious reflection on style and method, to be an effort to articulate the links between biblical paradigms, stories, and teaching, express that analogical link, and venture hypotheses about possible faithful new iterations of the same theme.

This hermeneutical posture is exemplified throughout Yoder's writings. Three essays in particular are useful to examine in light of my concerns. First, Yoder's reflections on the sixth commandment in "Thou Shalt Not Kill," from around 1980, shed light on what it meant for Yoder to discern paradigms that move and develop over the course of the canon. After comments on the context and startling brevity of the commandment not to kill, Yoder suggests a connection between the holiness of the mountain around which the people Israel gather and on which Moses meets God, and the life of the neighbor they are instructed not to take. "The terrifying 'touch not the mountain of 19:15 is mirrored in 'touch not the neighbor's spouse, his life, his goods'....Why killing is wrong cannot be said more briefly, more pointedly, than by saying that human blood belongs to YHWH because humanity is created it he divine image:"[49]

Yoder moves on from these observations about the relationship between the divine image and killing to suggest that this prohibition is best understood as an early crystallization of a trajectory of restriction of violence that expands throughout Scripture. After all, the commandment is problematic insofar as its relationship with the divine injunction to kill certain offenders—just verses later—is unresolved and ambiguous. This ambiguous relation, Yoder suggests, is best understood as the gradual restriction of revenge-based killings. He states, "this centralizing of life's protection in the covenant as the new political context fits with the struggle to make Israel a community of judge-mediated law, rather than prolonging into the settled life of

[48] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 85.
[49] John Howard Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," *To Hear The Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 40.

national Israel the simple clan-based retribution patterns of an earlier culture."[50] The meaning of the Scriptural injunction traditionally rendered in English "Thou shalt not kill" is bound up, forever, with its force as one step in the development of the morality and peoplehood of Israel.

Yoder traces this trajectory out in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. He states, "As the Decalogue had expanded bloodsafety from the family to the tribe, now the love of enemy and the missionary universalizing of the faith community make the concept of outsider or outlaw an empty set."[51] He concludes, "What had been going on, on the path from Sinai to the early Church, was organic growth and fruition."[52] While much of this has the ring of a certain brand of straightforward supersessionism, Yoder also identifies this trajectory in the Jewish community both before and after Christ. "Later Judaism extended restraints concerning number and the quality of judges and witnesses to the point where capital condemnation became quite improbable."[53] Noting this trajectory, Yoder then asks, "Does the notion of the unity of the canon support our or undercut out taking the line of movement we have discerned, from Sinai to Jesus and Jochanan, as itself 'canonical,' in the sense that its direction should continue to be our own? Or does the Church (ort the Synagogue) in changing circumstances retain the liberty to 'reach back behind' that direction of fulfillment marked by Jesus (or by Jochanan) for resources deemed more fitting?"[54] Yoder suggests, given the way Christians have expanded commandments about adultery and theft, that such a trajectory is indeed itself canonical.[55] The *meaning* of the commandment lies in the ultimate social shape given it in the trajectory

[50] Yoder,*To Hear the Word*, 43.
[51] Ibid., 44.
[52] Ibid., 45.
[53] Ibid., 44. "The sacredness of life as belonging to YHWH alone was defended initially by blood vengeance, then defended better in the Decalogue by reservation to the judges, then progressively still better (as in Numbers 35) by various kinds of mitigation, and still more from the age of Jeremiah to that of Akiva through the abandonment by Jews of the structures of civil justice. The same development has not been radicalized and generalized." 45.
[54] Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 46.
[55] Ibid. Though posing the issue as a rhetorical question obscures his position somewhat.

expanding through the history of Israel, the Prophets, and the New Testament. Each paradigm of restricting violence is given shape by the broader unity.

In a similar way in "The Original Revolution," an early essay, Yoder locates the meaning of the call of Abraham in the expansion and fulfillment of that call in the social form of the church. In the essay, Yoder narrates the continuity between calls for "revolution" (the essay was written in the early 1960s), Mary's Magnificat, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and the call of Abraham. Out of the Magnificat, Yoder draws the conviction that God's action will radically benefit the poor and downtrodden, it is "the language not of sweet maidens, but of Maccabees."[56] Yoder then suggests that "revolution" might be a fitting rendering of "gospel" in his contemporary context— "an event," like the "end of the Vietnam War," which "not merely…makes some of us happy, but one which shapes our common lives for the better."[57] The event that Jesus brought was the "judgment of God upon the present order and the imminent promise of another one…in which men may live together in love," yet this order was not brought about by carving out a "breathing space for the Jewish people" under Roman rule, neither was it the path of the revolutionary violence of the Zealots, the path of religious isolation and withdrawal, or the Pharisees' path of clearly defined religious boundaries for continued pure existence in the occupied land.[58] What Jesus really did, Yoder discovers, is precisely what God called Abraham to do.

> Abraham was called to get up and leave Chaldea, the cultural and religious capital of the known world in his age….He could not know when or whether or how he could again have a home, a land of his own. And yet as he rose to follow this inscrutable promise, he was told that it was through him that the nations of the world would be blessed. In response, Abraham promised his God that he would lead…a life different from the cultured and the religious peoples…among whom he was to make his pilgrim way. This is the original revolution; the creation of

[56] John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971, 2003), 14.
[57] Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 15.
[58] Ibid., 18-26.

> distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them.... [59]

In the same way, "Jesus created around Himself a society like no other society mankind had ever seen…voluntary…mixed racially…both rich and poor…forgiving…suffering…a new pattern of relationships between men and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person."[60] Yoder closes the piece asserting that the evangelical Protestant emphases on "anxiety and guilt," "intellectual confusion," and "moral weakness" and the way the gospel reshapes these things "are not wrong" but that "*all of this is not the Gospel.* This is just the bonus…the everything which will be added, without our taking thought for it, if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."[61] And finally, "We could accept, if we would repent, that novelty in our ways of dealing with one another, with ethnic differences, with social hierarchy, with money, with offences, with leaders and with power, for which 'revolutionary' is the only adequate word."[62]

This early essay exemplifies a tendency in Yoder's reading toward moving from the particulars of the text to a sociological account of the church. The unity of the Scriptures, in Yoder's hands, is constituted by their pointing to a certain program of action, "the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values" abstracted from the text, rather than by the images and figures of the text itself. The point of Abraham's call was that such a community

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[59] Ibid., 27, 28. Yoder here quotes Numbers 23:9. "From the rocky heights I see them, I watch them from the rounded hills. I see a people that dwells alone, that has not made itself one with the nations."
[60] Ibid., 29.
[61] Ibid., 32. Here Yoder uses all capital letters to indicate emphasis, not the italics in which I have rendered it. When the "The Original Revolution" was first written capitalization was, perhaps, a more typical sign of emphasis than italics. In any case, such capitalization is distracting and feels a bit like shouting now, so I have changed it here.
[62] Ibid., 33.

was to be voluntary, inter-ethnic, and so forth.[63] Even the way Yoder quotes Jesus' call to the kingdom of God at the end of his essay—just after his location of the meaning of the gospel in "the creation of a distinct community"—suggests that the kingdom of God is itself that structure. Thus, Yoder's reading of the Magnificat, Jesus' invitation to the kingdom of God, and the call of Abraham, confuses the necessary reforms of his time and our time, which are indeed at the heart of the gospel, with the gospel—and the kingdom—itself. Certainly the church in North American needs to hear the "novelty in our ways of dealing with one another, with ethnic differences, with social hierarchy, with money, with offences" that the gospel *brings*, but that pressing need does not mean that Yoder's narration of the gospel is not a reduction of its confrontational and liberating force. If the "original revolution" was the "creation of a distinct community with its own set of deviant values" and all the rest is "the bonus…the everything which will be added," the task of the theologian and historian is simply to exposit that finished shape, and if they do that task well enough, Scripture is finished. The challenge for those following after Yoder who seek to face the church, especially in North America, with the gap between its present life and the faithfulness required of it, is to articulate that challenge in ways that do not suggest the gospel is a constitution, or a playbook.

The style and content of much of Yoder's Scriptural reflection sit uneasily with his emphasis on the communal vulnerability of the church before Scripture which Yoder named as radical reformation. Yoder's specific method of inductive reading tended to produce a narrative trajectory resulting in his church vision. This is more than simply a critique of certainty, as though Yoder's conviction about the rightness of the free church position itself somehow

[63] Michael Cartwright states, in his afterward to Yoder's *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), how "striking" it is that Romans 9-11 plays little to no role in Yoder's argument, there or elsewhere—Yoder practically ignored the election of the people Israel, presumably because he found it incompatible with his focus on a voluntary, inter-ethnic, diasporic, Judaism. 227.

warranted our suspicion. Rather, Yoder's style tended to reduce the solidity of Scriptural figures in favor of the model of which they are a paradigm, and whose fulfillment was necessarily in the ideal present organization of the church. This method clashes with Yoder's often stated approach to Scripture as the source and occasion of church renewal. It is more difficult to cultivate an openness to Scripture if the figures of Scripture are situated as paradigms of an unarticulated model, because the impulse of such a reader will tend towards the articulation of that model and thus a kind of authority behind the text as though, in Yoder's own cautionary words, "our link to our origins were already in our own hands."[64] The radical reformation Yoder articulated and inhabited cannot be sustained by a hermeneutics whose primary function is to reveal the logic or model or trajectory behind the words of the biblical text.

Yoder resisted this reduction most effectively when he united the "paradigms" of Scripture with Scriptural imagery, most centrally the cross, rather than an account of church practice. "But We Do See Jesus," a later essay, shows Yoder exploring the analogical relation between five New Testament proclamations of the lordship of Christ. Yoder frames the essay as an exploration of the problem of "particularity" and truth. After asserting that it is a mistake for "the apologetic person emerging from the smaller world" to think that "the wider world is itself the universe," Yoder asks, "how can particular truths be proclaimed publicly?"[65] As a way of examining that question, Yoder takes five New Testament texts that, as Yoder describes them, enter different language worlds with the message of the gospel. He examines in turn, the prologue to the Gospel of John, the account of Jesus as high priest in Hebrews 2, the discussion of Christ and the powers and principalities in the letter to the Colossians, the first vision of John in Revelation 4, and the kenotic Christ-hymn in Philippians 2. In different ways, Yoder finds all

[64] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 70.
[65] John Howard Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth" in *The Priestly Kingdom,* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984, 2001), 49.

these apostolic writers doing the same kind of thing. "We could call it a syndrome or a deep structure." Each writer accepts the categories of the language world, but places Christ "above the cosmos, in charge of it" and confesses that that lordship is accredited only by rejection and "suffering in human form," so that "the cosmology has been smashed, or melted down for recasting. Its language has been seized and used for a different message."[66] Yoder also finds that what the text exhorts their readers into, is "the self-emptying and the death—and only by that path, and by grace, the resurrection—of the Son," and that the writer and readers thus share in the victory accomplished by Christ.[67]

"But We Do See Jesus" evidences a similar pattern of "inductive" reading visible in "The Original Revolution," and in "Thou Shalt Not Kill"—and yet somewhat distinct from these as well. Yoder articulates the form of the analogous relation between this series of texts, and in this case, more clearly than in "The Original Revolution," he, expresses the form of that analogy as itself the fitting expression of Christ's lordship in the contemporary context of pluralism and relativism. This involves an ambiguous relation to the first-order claims of the texts themselves. He states near the end,

> For our world, it will be in his ordinariness as villager, as rabbi, as king on a donkey, and as liberator on a cross that we shall be able to express the claims which the apostolic proclaimers to Hellenists expressed in the language of preexistence and condescension. This is not to lower our sights or to retract our proclamation. It is to renew the description of Christ crucified as the wisdom and power of God. This is the low road to general validity…The truth has come to our side of the ditch.[68]

The mechanism for faithful proclamation is discerned as a pattern linking the texts, (and, therefore, for Yoder, latent in the worldview of the community that produced them) and that very

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[66] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 53, 51.
[67] Ibid. Yoder also finds that "there is affirmed…what later confession called preexistence, co-essentiality with the Father, possession of the image of God, and the participation of the Son in creation and providence."
[68] Ibid., 62.

mechanism is itself the church's faithful proclamation in the present time. "The language of preexistence and condescension" is relativized (though Yoder previously affirmed it, see below, n. 67) as the surface expression of a more fundamental pattern. Further, Yoder links this pattern back to the form of the church. He states, "The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides as it must with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades."[69] Even more strongly than the previous language about the nature of Scriptural proclamations of Christ's preexistence, this compelling sentence seems to relativize such proclamations in the *practice* of the church's life, if not—on the most charitable interpretation of Yoder's words—the independent truth of them. That is to say, it is not completely clear what a faithful iteration of this Scriptural theme would look like with respect to those original first order proclamations.

However, in this case Yoder has not employed the use of the language of trajectory in outlining the theme that makes sense of the text, and thus the difficulties of the first two essays are perhaps not quite as severe here, or at least, they are of a different kind. The developing social forms of the people of God have not eclipsed these New Testament passages, because Yoder does not take them up into a broader theme developing beyond them (or rather, the development remains vague). Instead, what unites these passages ultimately is the image of the risen, crucified Christ. In Yoder's hands, these passages look backward and forward and are held, together, by that image, rather than being taken up into a theme of social development. Further, this image retains its irreducible centrality *over against any attempt to specify its*

[69] Ibid., 54. Stanley Hauerwas appreciates this insight as "pure Toeltsch," but "the substantive implication" as "pure Yoder." However, in detailing his affirmation of Yoder's insight, Hauerwas tellingly reverses Yoder's order. Hauerwas states, "Yoder helps us see not only why but how Nicea's confessions that Jesus is very God and very man is not just 'theology' but *entails* a politics that will always challenge the violence at the heart of the politics of the world." From Hauerwas' Foreword to *The Priestly Kingdom* , ix. Emphasis mine. I like this rather a lot, but it is not quite what Yoder is saying.

meaning. This strategy defines Yoder's greatest challenge to the church, especially in *The Politics of Jesus*, where Yoder compellingly argues that the New Testament consistently presumes that "only on one subject—but then consistently, universally—is Jesus our example: in his cross."[70] In a similar way, "But We Do See Jesus" is most compelling as an attempt to articulate a cruciform epistemology and missiology, rather than as a movement behind Scripture to lay bare the logic of its proclamations—though both are present.

A similar dynamic is at play in Yoder's work *Body Politics*, which, though I cannot provide a full reading of, I will briefly note. There Yoder discerns a pattern in the political reality of baptism, Eucharist, "binding and loosing," the "fullness of Christ," and "the rule of Paul" that "the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called."[71] This summary seems productive, not reductive, because the relation of fulfillment, while certain, remains unspecified. However, Yoder's discussion of these practices, while an important corrective to church practice, does have a reductive quality to them just insofar as Yoder is understood to be laying forth the essential inner meaning of, say, Eucharist as "basic economic sharing among members of the messianic community."[72] Yoder can be read as reducing Christian claims to an essential politics *or* showing how Christian claims are always also inherently political.[73] Yoder is most *fruitfully* read in the latter way, but the

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[70] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 95.
[71] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*, (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), ix.
[72] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 21.
[73] Some of both Yoder's supporters (e.g. Ted Grimsrud or J. Denny Weaver) and his detractors (e.g. Paul Martens) read him in the former way. Hauerwas, most principally, reads him in the latter way. David Cramer has very helpfully compiled a typology of those influenced by Yoder—who indeed encompass a staggering range from traditionalist evangelicals, to Christian anarchists and radical democrats, to Hauerwasian postliberals, postmodern skeptics, and liberal revistionists,. "Inheriting Yoder Faithfully: A Review of New Yoder Scholarship," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85/1 (2011): 133-146. The very layout of his typology (perhaps with intentional irony?) is reminiscent of Yoder's frequent use of such lists. A sample of Hauerwas' style, and the way he would read Yoder: "Christian ethics and politics are not areas to be developed after we have done theology but rather are constitutive of Christian speech whose form is first and foremost prayer." Hauerwas, "Only Theology Overcomes Ethics: Or, What "Ethicists" Must Learn From Jenson," in *A Better Hope*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 125.

ambiguity, as demonstrated in "Thou Shalt Not Kill" and "The Original Revolution," runs through his work.

Recent Criticism

Several other voices, most clearly Peter Ochs and Alex Sider, have challenged Yoder's work in similar ways. Peter Ochs' recent work, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews,* surveys recent postliberal Christian theologians in the United States and England to test Ochs' central argument that postliberal options in Christian theology today offer a way for Christians to both renew a high Christology and view of tradition and Scripture, and reject supersessionist approaches to Judaism. In fact, Ochs argues not only for the possibility of nonsupersessionist postliberalism, but that postliberal theology is necessarily nonsupersessionist, and that this nonsupersessionism is a happy byproduct of their hermeneutical orientation. To test this hypothesis, Ochs summarizes the contributions of George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Daniel Hardy, David Ford, and John Milbank in terms of their varied contributions to postliberal theology and their approach to supersessionism. Ochs associates the styles of postliberal thought in all of these thinkers with their nonsupersessionism. To the extent that Yoder and Milbank evidence supersessionist tendencies, Ochs isolates non-postliberal modes of reasoning in their work to account for them.

While Ochs hesitates to describe any kind of "essential" postliberal way of doing theology, he does suggest that on the whole, theologians characterized as postliberal are concerned first with repairing divisions in the church caused by the vicious dyadic logics strengthened by modernity. "The fundamental problem to which postliberalism responds is not modernity or modernism but a more general tendency to reduce the logic that guides our efforts

at societal and ecclesial repair to a logic of dyads".[74] Rather than suggest a "correct approach" in dyadic contrast to which everything else must be "incorrect," Ochs suggests that postliberalism seeks to *repair* the fractures of modernity (including, especially, church schism) by seeing Scripture—and the early traditions of its interpretation—as the perennial source of training and instruction in ways of repair in different contexts. So, Ochs argues, postliberals generally emphasize context-specificity, relationality, ("that the repair binds together sufferer, agent of repair, and source of repair") vagueness ("that the rules of repairs cannot be diagrammed independent of this specific activity of repair") and therefore recognition that God is the ultimate source of repair.[75] It is these qualities that lead to a close association between postliberalism and nonsupersessionism.[76]

Ochs' treatment of John Howard Yoder illustrates further the way Ochs sees the relationship between postliberal approaches to Scripture and supersessionism. Ochs identifies strong postliberal tendencies in his work, including an emphasis on a reparative reading of Scripture and history for the healing of the church. Yoder's strong assertion that the Jewish-Christian schism "did not have to be" is, on the face of it, nonsupersessionist.[77] Additionally,

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[74] Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011), 9.

[75] Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 17. Throughout the book, and particularly in his discussion of postliberalism as repair, Ochs is guided heavily by the American pragmatist Charles Peirce.

[76] For Ochs, George Lindbeck exemplifies most clearly these ways in which postliberal approaches to Scripture lead both an ever-reforming account of the church and a nonsupersessionist approach to Israel and Judaism. Ochs says of Lindbeck's views, "Replacement theology obstructs the Scriptural inquiry that is intrinsic to the reformation practices of the early church." Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 42. If, as Och's has been arguing, the practices of Scripture-reading are, among others things, formation in the work of repair, then it must be read over and over again. If the New Testament is understood, properly, to be a reading of the Old Testament, this does not prevent new meanings of the story of Israel to yield themselves. Ochs again summarizes Lindbeck, "This rereading is instead a perennial event of returning to the plain sense of Israel's story and rediscovering every day what it now means in the light of the Gospel narrative of Jesus Christ" 43. Thus, "while the Christian reader must say that 'Jesus Christ is the Messiah of Israel,' no reader knows before the event of reading everything there is to say about the meaning of that sentence now…" 43. If the church reads the Old Testament "only in order to understand how it is replaced by the New Testament" such a church could no longer "read Scripture as the living Word of God" with the possibility of "radical criticism, repair, and reform." Thus, Ochs argues, a postliberal approach to Scripture will lead postliberals to "discover" the necessity of nonsupersessionism 44.

[77] See Yoder's "It Did Not Have to Be" in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited.*

Yoder's attention to the similarities between his free church ecclesiology, and the tendencies in exilic Judaism toward nonviolence, missionary work, and a calling to exile among the nations, undercut traditional arguments for the unique and therefore superseding place of Christianity.[78] Ochs primarily interrogates Yoder's essay "See How They Go With Their Face to the Sun"—a reading of Jeremiah's vision of exile, as calling. There Yoder argues most simply that "to be scattered is not a hiatus, after which normality will resume….dispersion shall be the calling of the Jewish faith community."[79] Jeremiah's blessing to "seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile" (29:7) is not, according to Yoder, "a detour" but "the beginning of the next millennium and a half….it was the beginning…of a new phase of the Mosaic project."[80]

However, exactly insofar as Yoder sees fit to outline the traits of diaspora living in proto-rabbinic Judaism as essential Judaism, Yoder, Ochs says, reads back onto the Jewish tradition a directionality which can only find its fulfillment in his free church model, and is therefore *non*-nonsupersessionist (as Ochs puts it). There is almost the sense that Yoder sees himself as qualified to rule on the "best" strand of the Jewish tradition—as the most Jewish. So Ochs states, "Yoder's praise for one dimension of Judaism has the effect of condemning another dimension as if it were 'not worthy of being Jewish'… it valorizes only the one variety of Judaism that anticipates Yoder's free church."[81] The results I found in Yoder's treatment of the

[78] See the characteristics listed by Yoder in "See How They Go With Their Face to the Sun" in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 187.
[79] Yoder, "See How They Go With Their Face to the Sun" in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 183.
[80] Yoder, "See How They Go," 184. Yoder regularly used his own translations of Biblical texts in his writings, often rendering them in creative ways that illuminated new readings. In this case, it is illuminating that Yoder's translation is "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, and pray to JHVH on its behalf," completely eliding "into exile" 184.
[81] Ibid., 147.

sixth commandment in "Thou Shalt Not Kill" and of the call of Abraham in "The Original Revolution" resonate with Ochs' analysis.[82]

Ochs argues that this "non-nonsupersessionist" tendency in Yoder's thought is associated with non-postliberalism. Most simply, Ochs suggests that Yoder suffers from a deep-seated modern tendency to dismiss and mistrust inherited traditions. Ochs muses that Yoder's work exhibits a dyadic approach to church reform where "either our knowledge is wholly unreliable or it must be grounded in some immediate, inerrant intuition" and thus Yoder's "mistrust of antecedent traditions" becomes a "tendency to promote his genealogy and depth historiography in a foundationalist-like way."[83] On the other side of the same coin, Yoder seems to know in advance what Scripture and history will tell us. "Yoder appears to have replaced the ongoing practice of Scriptural reading with an effort to generalize the conclusions to which his reading has brought him."[84] Ochs does not portray this as a fatal wound in Yoder's work but an instructive example in the importance of acknowledging fallibility.

Ephraim Radner provides an alternative reading of the proto-rabbinic Judaism Yoder celebrates. Whereas Yoder reads Jeremiah's injunction to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" as vocation, Radner reads it as both judgment and blessing, and only thus as vocation. Jeremiah "counsels not a faithful acquiescence to a life *in via*, but an

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[82] And the analysis of Michael Cartwright, who has edited two of Yoder's works, including one, with Peter Ochs, of Yoder's writings on Judaism, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. Cartwright states, "Polyphony *would not* be a word that aptly describes Yoder's hermeneutic. However peaceable his pedagogical approach may have been in the way he engaged just-war theorists, the way Yoder goes about establishing the link between Christian and Jewish 'vocations' to peacemaking is to create a new set of dichotomies to replace the Constantinian assumptions that he seeks to supplant." "Afterward: 'If Abraham is Our Father…'" *The Jewish Christian Schism Revisited,* 215. Emphasis original.

[83] "This is to read every antecedent source of current church practice as comparably divisive and thus as a source of nonrepair. The implication is that unless the church is irreparable, the Christian genealogist must have unmediated access to the apostolic witness." Ibid., 156.

[84] Peter Ochs, "Commentary," *The Jewish Christian Schism Revisited,* 159. He concludes, "If radical reformers and exilic rabbinic thinkers are to share in a community of interpretation that has not previously occurred an of which Yoder's words may be the harbinger, then we cannot possibly know, before the fact, how that community of study will read Scripture and what voice will speak from out of their reading." 159.

embracing of the very shape of divine abandonment embodied in their defeat….Hope and repentance come later, Jeremiah insists, after the seventy years of, literally, marking time. Only 'then you will call upon me and come and pray to me' (v. 12)."[85] Unlike Yoder, Radner's reading does not position Jeremiah as the initial crescendo of the theme of diasporic living, but rather as one stage in the life of Israel which Jesus' life, death, and resurrection recapitulate and into which the church now lives. Yet there is, once again, a curious similarity between Radner's embrace of diaspora and Yoder's. Yoder's work might best be understood as arguing that it is only by living into this shape—out of control, cruciform, diasporic—that Scripture can become meaningful in the life of the church, rather than (as I suspect he more intended) as articulating the politics to which Scripture *points*. This is certainly the tone of Radner's work—that it is by living into the shape of divine abandonment that the Church might still participate in the history of God with the world.[86]

Alex Sider, in his *To See History Doxologically*, examines the way Yoder wrote about the church's understanding of history—particularly its own peccable history. While the book as a whole is an attempt to show how Yoder's work could help the church understand its task of narrating its peccable history Sider, like Ochs, teases out a tendency in Yoder to read history primarily as a confirmation of his ecclesiology. In a later article, Sider summarizes his critique of Yoder, stating most simply, "Yoder's reading of the early church is much more uniform and

[85] Radner, *The End Of The Church*, 332.
[86] "God's command to live in the brazen truth of disappointment—here along is Israel's and the Church's continued touch with an alien form of graciousness. The Church cannot repent; yet it can die. The words 'why have you forsaken me"—once uttered and reiterated in the flesh of time—themselves restore the forms to time that God had given it from its foundation. 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself' (2 Tim. 2:13). For lack of repentance, one can still assert the figure of our Lord, history can be disestablished in favor of God, simply by dying where one is and asking fro no more than that God bless this dislodged place of standing." Ibid., 332.

monological than it ought to be given his convictions about the nature of doing history."[87] Sider does not argue with the importance of Yoder's basic distinction between the church before and after the fourth century, between "Constantinian" and "non-Constantinian" Christianity. Rather Sider argued that Yoder's way of tracing the beginnings of the "shift" failed to attend to the unresolved ambiguities of early Christianity and that his narrative condemnation of "Constantinianism" at times itself slips into a "Constantinian" reading of history. Sider argues that Yoder oversimplified the differences between the "martyrs," those who died for Christianity, and "apologists," those who outlined Christian faith in the Hellenistic context, as a way to tell his story of acculturation and corruption in the church around the time of Constantine. "The Constantinian settlement appears as but the logical outworking of the apologetic tradition—Tertullian sets the stage for Theodosius."[88] Sider states, "Yoder's argument for increasing acculturation in the pre-Constantinian church and a slow but perceptible drift into a comfortable relationship with empire begins to look like an attempt to retell the past in order to furnish it with a suitable dénouement."[89] Sider also notes the way Yoder skipped over the particularly brutal nature of the final persecution of Christians under Diocletian—contra Yoder's narration of a gradually accommodated church—as well as the real possibility raised by scholars that the church, just after the period of accommodation and establishment, may have placed greater emphasis on standards of conduct in relation to Christian identity than immediately before.[90]

Again, Sider is not seeking to overthrow the usefulness of the "Constantinian/non-Constantinian" distinction; rather Sider shows how that very distinction requires great deal more

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[87] Alexander Sider, "Constantine and Myths of the Fall of the Church: An Anabaptist View," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85/4 (2011), 633.
[88] J. Alexander Sider, *To See History Doxologically: History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), 111. Much the way, I would argue, David or Solomon set the stage for Constantine, in Yoder's view. See for instance, "Is Not His Word Like Fire? The Bible and Civil Turmoil" in *For the Nations*.
[89] Sider, *To See History Doxologically*, 112.
[90] Ibid., 112,113, 123,124.

care in how we tell this particular story. Yoder's genius was to show "that things" did not have "to go the way they did."[91] Perhaps in this case Sider's work has been to attempt to see how reasonable it was that they *did*, and to attempt to see and convict ourselves in that reasonableness.

Indeed, the heart of Sider's argument with Yoder, I suspect, is that the history of Constantinianism is "our" history, not "their" history. This is in fact in line with Yoder's other observations about historiography. The church must always allow its telling of history to challenge the church today. Understood at its best, Sider states, "Yoder's ecclesiological thought is…a way of being in time that envisions the praise of God as at least in part constituted by an often-discordant relationship to our pasts. Rather than conceiving of holiness as a matter of 'getting it all straight' right now…Yoder conceived of doxology as a series of practices that cultivate patience—a nonviolent and equivocal or difficult habitus—as necessary context within which to confess the church as holy."[92] One of the things this "patience" and "equivocal" nonviolence means in practice is the acknowledgement that the failings of history are also our failings. Sider states, "a doxological vision of history prompts the perhaps painful recognition that this past of disavowal and apostasy is effective for us."[93] Even radical reformers, those whose break with Catholicism or Protestantism was predicated on a repudiation of Constantine cannot set Constantine "aside as 'the road not taken.'"[94] If, as Yoder argued, "the true meaning of history is in the church" then Sider wants Yoder to more persistently remember his own qualifier, that "this history is, at least in part, one of disavowal and apostasy." Or, at its simplest,

[91] Yoder, "The Burden and Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism" in *Nonviolent America*, 25.
[92] Sider, *To See History Doxologically*, 100.
[93] Ibid., 101.
[94] Ibid., 101.

"Constantinianism is us," Sider says.[95] He continues, "Once one argues that the way you tell the story of your past is a matter of praising God, then one has to learn to reckon honestly with the difficulties that the past presents, and this is a comment about biography as well as about Christian traditions: if memory is doxological, it will also be equivocal."[96] One never knows the last word God might be bringing from the past to disrupt our pride.

Yoder's easy typologies of "Constantinianism" contradict his assertions at other times that readings of history must be vulnerable and always alive with the possibility of challenging the present. In this sense, Yoder himself, Sider argues, was guilty of a kind of "Constantinian" reading of history. "Constantinianism," after all, implies a historiography that is "shaped by the desire to secure a single master narrative of events 'as they really happened.' While Yoder explicitly rejected this methodological use of Constantinianism, he nevertheless continued to foster historical narratives that were methodologically Constantinian in origin and use."[97]

So Sider finally concluded, "Yoder did not articulate a clearly non-Constantinian theology" for "his overly schematic treatment of the material kept him from listening to those voices as patiently as he might."[98] However, Sider is confident that Yoder's writings point in helpful directions for overcoming this tendency; Yoder did outline the task ahead of the church historian, which will "involve one in patient and thorough willingness to reassess the stories we have inherited about Constantine's legacy." This historiography will not rest with easy, "take it or leave it" answers, but will be, Sider concluded, quoting Yoder, "willing to labor through and tarry with the process of negotiating the 'the only history we have,' the same history 'with which

[95] Ibid., 121. This is partly because "Constantinianism resists historical dissection…there could be no definitive display of its mechanisms." "That it prescribes the forms of knowledge that would constitute and govern empirico-historical investigation is what I mean when I say that Constantinianism has a transcendental use." Ibid. Constantinianism, says Sider, quoting Foucault, "constitutes a history of human knowledge that could both be given to empirical investigation and prescribe its forms." Ibid. Sider quotes from Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 319.
[96] Ibid., 101. Emphasis mine.
[97] Ibid., 122.
[98] Ibid., 132.

God has chosen to lead a confused people toward at least a degree of understanding of certain dangers and things not to say if we are to remain faithful.'"[99] Patience with the past, then, is not so much a blanket affirmation of its ambiguity, but a willingness to shoulder the difficulties we find there as our own.

The criticisms of Ochs and Sider reveal a very similar accusation. While Ochs focuses more on Scripture, and Sider focuses more on history, both claim that Yoder was too quick to arrive at answers that confirmed his own desired free-church ecclesiology and the historical and Scriptural narrative that most easily accompanied it. Furthermore, both claim that these tendencies in Yoder contradicted his own better insights about the necessity of always "looping back," to be corrected by again and again by new insights from history and Scripture.

John Howard Yoder's long and thorough engagement with the Bible is at the center of his immense gift of clarity about the challenge of the cross to church communities in the 21st century. In his work, Yoder engaged Scripture primarily as a collection of paradigms with a trajectory that went beyond Scripture and landed in his articulations of the form of the church. Those readings are gifts not to be thrown away, but it is, I believe, the task of the next generation to articulate the challenge of the gospel in ways more humble, (if no less certain) more rooted in Scriptural figures, and more repentant, beside the Christ who, we trust, will not abandon the church as we interpret all of Scripture in relation to him. After all, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word."

[99] Ibid. Sider is quoting from Yoder's discussion of how Christians might understand both the importance of the creeds, and the messy politics that played a role in their production, *Preface to Theology*, 223.

Part II

Scripture, Reference, and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*: Frei in Context

"The meaning of the doctrine is the story."[100]

Hans Frei achieved, perhaps more than anyone else in the last half-century, a reorientation within academic theology around the narrative character of the Bible. By his own assessment he aimed at nothing less than a way beyond the impasse of fundamentalist biblical literalism and reductive historical criticism—both of which located the "meaning" of the biblical texts behind the stories themselves. The Bible, in Frei's view, recommends itself to its readers not as a list of historical facts or as a book of morals but as a "realistic narrative," whose "literal meaning" discerned in community has "a normative and pure 'meaning' world of its own, which…stands on its own with the authority of self-evident intelligibility."[101] The priority of this type of reading is rooted, in Frei's view, in the centrality of the "history-like" gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and resurrection.[102] Jesus is known first and foremost not as the exemplar of some a-historical moral or existential type, but as the "unsubstituable " individual who died and was raised from the dead. [103] Frei's project can thus be understood as a call to greater attentiveness to the demands of the text and indeed the demands of Christ on the reader. Within this broad similarity with the shape of Yoder's work, Frei's historical analysis and hermeneutical proposals can shed light on the difficulties of Yoder's reading habits, but also,

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[100] Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 126.
[101] Hans Frei. "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?," in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. Hunsinger and Placher, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 140. For a constructive critique of this way of articulating the hermeneutical task see Rowan William's "The Judgment of the World" in his *On Christian Theology*, (Malden, MS: Blackwel, 2000). Williams comments actually harmonize with Springs exposition of Frei, see 51 ff. below.
[102] Frei. "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative…," 121.
[103] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, (Euguene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 133.

more constructively, can thicken Yoder's account of the importance of discipleship and reading with an account of the presence of Jesus to the reading disciple.

A History of Reading

"Frei certainly never thought of himself as a 'great theologian,' but he did have a central passion, a central idea…He grew convinced that nearly the whole of modern Christian theology, from the radical to the fundamentalist, had taken a wrong turn."[104] That wrong turn consisted, as William Placher summarizes, in the shift from reading the Bible as the world of meaning in which the lives of believers found their meaning, to reading Scripture in order to either (a) illustrate universal truths or (b) provide an extended knowledge of historical fact. Seeing both these options as wrong turns in the tradition, Frei offers an account of the Bible as a "realistic narrative," the reading of which is governed by the communally practiced "literal sense" of the text.

In his best known work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei carefully carries his readers through a wide-ranging study of eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics, mostly of Protestants in England and Germany, in an attempt to show how interpretation of the biblical texts shifted from a time in which the texts, in the hands of precritical readers, referred intratextually (and intertextually) to the world of the Bible, to a time in which the text only referred extratextually to the "universal" worlds of history and experience.[105] Though the work as a whole is not an attempt to uncomplicatedly resurrect precritical reading, the story Frei tells is the story of movement from a simpler time into the less productive reading habits of the modern period.

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[104] William Placher, "Hans Frei and the Meaning of Biblical Narrative," *The Christian Century*, 106/18 (1989), 556.
[105] The book, as Frei states in the preface, "falls into the almost legendary category of analysis of the Bible in which not a single text is examined, not a single exegesis is undertaken." Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), vii. This dry humor is only the most obvious reward of the persistent reader of Frei's work.

Frei begins with three facets of precritical Bible-reading in Western Christianity. First, *if* a "biblical story was to be read literally" then "it followed automatically that it referred to and described actual historical circumstances."[106] That is, "the true historical reference of a story was a direct and natural concomitant of its making literal sense" and not the other way round. Second, precritical reading was marked by the use of figural interpretation of biblical stories in order to join the biblical texts into a single narrative, since "the real historical world described by the several biblical stories is a single world of one temporal sequence."[107] This was "a natural extension of literal interpretation" for it was "literalism at the level of the whole biblical story and thus of the depiction of the whole of historical reality. Figuration was at once a literary and a historical procedure, an interpretation of stories and their meanings by weaving them together into a common narrative."[108] As Frei described figuration in a much later essay, "An event real in its own right and a meaning complex and meaningful in its own right"—like the Israelite Joshua and the conquest of Canaan, or David and the kingship of Israel—"are nonetheless understood to be incomplete, and thus 'figures' of the event-and-or-meaning that fulfills them in the story of Jesus or in the universal story from creation to eschaton, of which it was the effectually shaping centerpiece."[109] Finally, since this single, interconnected world of biblical narrative was the real world, it was the "duty" of the reader to "fit himself into that world" and to

[106] Frei, *Eclipse*, 2. "This is a far cry from taking the fact that a passage or text makes best sense at a literal level as evidence that it is a reliable historical report. When commentators turned from the former to the latter interprets use of literal meaning or used the two confusedly…it marked a new stage in the history of interpretation—a stage for which deistic convictions, empirical philosophy, and historical criticism form part of the technical intellectual background." 2.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Frei. "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?," in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. Hunsinger and Placher, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 122.

do so by "figural interpretation, and in part of course by his mode of life."[110] The encircling events of the life of the readers were to be "figures of that storied world."

Frei's work depended explicitly on observations made by Eric Auerbach about the Bible in *Mimesis*, his monumental survey of Western literature. Frei quotes one key paragraph from Auerbach's comparison of Homer and the biblical writers that illuminates the key characteristics of the biblical narrative world Frei highlights. Auerbach states that the Old Testament narrative, "far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours… seeks to overcome our reality, we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."[111]

However, Frei states, "this mode of interpretation…broke down with increasing rapidity" in the eighteenth century. Surprisingly, while Frei notes the way that historical criticism began to cast doubt on the historicity of the events in the Bible (and thus relocate the meaning of the Biblical texts in a history external to it) event, he emphasizes more the role of conservative commentators' attempts to show how biblical prophecy was fulfilled in contemporary times as that which furthered most "a kind of detachment of the 'real' historical world from its biblical description."[112] "This kind of prophecy, rather than an anachronism, was the sign of a new cultural development, for its emphasis was on the events, on their likely course, and on the

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[110] Frei, *Eclipse*, 3.

[111] Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15. Quoted in Frei, *Eclipse*, 3. This is a key sentence not only for Frei, but also George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to religion and the whole postliberal way of thinking demonstrated by them. Shepherd Book, the enigmatic preacher in Joss Whedon's space-western *Firefly* television series, makes a similar point. After coming upon his ripped apart Bible on the kitchen table, he says to River, the psychotic child prodigy who had been ripping out contradictory verses, "You don't fix the Bible…it fixes you." "Jaynestown," Episode 7, *Firefly*, Fox. Originally aired October 18, 2002.

[112] Frei, *Eclipse*, 4. The phenomenally successful *Left Behind* series of books and movies—which assimilates the narrative world of the Bible not only to the present age but to the particular concerns of the American right—is but the most obvious of this still widespread type of prophecy in contemporary Western Christianity.

hidden signs and references to this 'real' world of past and future history, spread through the Bible."[113]

This shift, difficult to discern at first, resulted in a redirection of biblical interpretation. The meaning of Scripture came to consist in its reference to real things outside it rather than the other way round. On the conservative side, this reality was the history literally recorded in the text. On the liberal or radical side, a greater skepticism about the coherence of historical fact and textual description forced commentators to suggest a harmony between the biblical texts and the universal concepts, truths, or experiences which they illustrated. "The point is that the direction of interpretation now became the reverse of earlier days," says Frei. "Do the stories and whatever concept s may be drawn from them describe what we apprehend as the real world? Do they fit a more general framework of meaning than that of a single story?"[114] In principle, in the modern period, "whether or not the story is true history, its meaning is *detachable* from the specific story that sets it forth."[115] Again, "In either case, history or else allegory or myth, the meaning of the stories was finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves."[116] This resulted in the collapse of typological reading, for neither historical criticism, which emphasized the grammatical and historical investigation of the "original sense of the text" for its original audience, nor the investigation of the distance between fact and text could sustain a reading of texts that both carefully notes the particularities of individual circumstance—in, say, the story of Abraham's visitation by three guests in Genesis 18—and binds those particularities on to another part of the biblical world—like the Trinity. Seemingly straightforward propositional Old Testament prophecy, on the other hand, like Isaiah's testimony

[113] Ibid., 4.
[114] Ibid., 5.
[115] Ibid. 6. Emphasis mine.
[116] Ibid., 11.

to the "young woman" who is "with child and shall bear a son" came to bear more and more weight as a means of unifying the canon.[117]

Indeed, this unification came to be a crisis for commentators increasingly concerned with original intent, historical fact, and universalizable meaning. Increasingly unable to rely on traditional modes of figural interpretation to unify the diverse canon, the varied and conflicting nature of the biblical texts became more and more of a problem. Thus it became necessary to show a consistency either of conceptuality or experience or history. "The fragmentation of a unitary canon was at least as grave a threat to the traditional status of the Bible as authority for belief as was the direct assault on its historical reliability…. The divine authority of the Bible in prescribing belief is possible only if its meaning is the same throughout, if it is essentially clear, and if it is the product of special divine communication rather than the fruit of human understanding gained naturally from other sources and then applied to the Bible."[118]

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative is a bizarre work in that it reads so easily as a story of decline and fall, but lacks the requisite counter-call to arms addressed to the reader. It merely ends, rather dismally, with the repeated failures of commentators to grasp the "realistic narrative" quality of the biblical texts. His final sentence—"Whether anything has changed in this respect since the days of Schleiermacher and Hegel [who missed it, but just] is a question for another day"—is in fact more hopeful than his introduction, in which he states, "Were we to pursue our theme into the biblical hermeneutics of the twentieth century, I believe we would find that with regard to the recognition of the distinctiveness of realistic biblical narrative…the story has remained much the same."[119] But this is no simple tale of fall from grace, for while Frei may perhaps have viewed the failures of modern commentators to grasp the "realistic narrative"

[117] Isaiah 7:14.
[118] Frei, *Eclipse,* 162.
[119] Frei, *Eclipse,* 324, 16.

quality of the biblical texts as unnecessary, and avoidable, the movement from precritical to critical is, it seems, irreversible. Even if a return to precritical interpretation were entirely desirable, it would not, I believe Frei would say, be quite possible, because the "breakup of the cohesion between the literal meaning of the biblical narratives and their reference to actual events" cannot simply be undone.[120]

Frei's work is an attempt to narrate this breakup—its causes and effects—and articulate ways for Christian communities to go on reading Scripture after it, which, if irreversibly changed by modernity, are still in continuity with the historic practice of Christian reading.[121] "Going on," in Frei's own work meant describing how the realistic character of the biblical texts, culminating in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, made demands on the reader to either be enfolded into its world, or to reject it (but in either case to see the text as presenting this alternative) and that this challenge was a natural concomitant, to borrow Frei's earlier phrasing, of the texts having been written for the catechetical purposes of communities of faith.

"Realistic narrative" is the term Frei used, especially in the first half of his career, to describe the claims of Scripture upon its readers. "Realistic narrative" denoted for Frei the life-like, ordinary, non-symbolic, quality of the stories of Scripture (especially, again, the Gospels). He describes realistic narrative in the introduction to *Eclipse* as that

> in which characters or individual persons, in their internal depth or subjectivity as well as in their capacity as doers and sufferers of actions or events, are firmly and significantly set in the context of the external environment….Realistic narrative is that kind in which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other. Neither character nor

[120] Ibid., 4. Humpty-Dumpty comes appropriately to mind.
[121] A work strikingly parallel to Frei's in this way is Daniel Weiss Halivni's *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (SCM Press, 2001), which grapples with the "maculated" form of the received Torah as itself revelation—of the faithfulness of God, the sins of humanity, and the work and example of Ezra the prophet and scholar.

> circumstance separately, nor yet their interaction, is a shadow of something else more real or more significant. Nor is one more important than the other in the story.[122]

A sentence quoted by Frei from Henry James, just after this, affirms not only the realistic character of the literature, but suggests also that analogous sorts of narrative might be found in novels.[123]

How the biblical narratives might continue to enfold readers into itself in critical and postcritical times was articulated by Frei most extensively and exegetically in his work *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, which might be understood as a hermeneutical rebuke to modern practices of reading Scripture.[124] Jason Springs, one of Frei's most able and thorough recent commenters, stated that Frei's work in *Identity* is to carefully trace the surface of the Gospel stories with the question of Jesus' presence and identity in mind, in order to avoid "two persistent modern quandaries: (1) *reference* as the basis for meaning and credibility, and (2) *intention* as the basis for identity and agency."[125] That is, Frei sought to avoid construing the meaning of the gospel stories in their putative reference to perhaps a more complete history, or a universal frame of human experience. Frei also positioned his discussion—around the question of the "presence" of Christ—in relation to Protestant and Idealist emphases on the self-consciousness of Jesus, and its communication to the believer as interior, personal, unmediated experience and on which account the *actions* of Jesus merely manifest his more foundational inner state (which, it

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[122] Ibid., 14. Note again that in Frei's view figural reading is not an eclipse of the particularities of character and circumstance, but a deepening and extension of them.
[123] "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" in *The Future of the Novel*, quoted by Frei, *Eclipse*, 14.
[124] This is how Jason Springs describes the "subtly polemical aspect" of *Identity*. Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27.
[125] Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy*, 29. *Identity* (1970) came before *Eclipse* (1974) to be sure, but it does not seem inappropriate to view *Identity* as a demonstration of the kind of reading Frei looks for and fails to find in *Eclipse*.

is assumed, is the proper domain of religion).[126] As Springs nicely summarizes, Frei responded to these "modern quandaries" by "treating the form and content of the biblical narratives as indissoluble."[127]

To that end, Frei sought to read the Gospel stories with as few conceptual tools as possible, asking only "Who is he?" and "What is he like?" In pursuit of these questions, and consonant with his attempt to render the inseparability of Scriptural form and content, Frei employed an "intention-action scheme" to describe Jesus. Following philosopher of language Gilbert Ryle, Frei rejected the notion a person's identity might be understood as "a ghost in the machine," constant and unaffected by its surroundings, Frei attempted to read the Gospel accounts in *Identity* so as to make clear the way that Jesus' identity and presence, intertwined, such that, "a person is not merely illustrated, he is *constituted* by his particular intentional act at any given point in his life."[128] Plainly put, Jesus' actions and his suffering the actions of others—most especially his crucifixion and resurrection—tell us who he is. "We may discern the continuity of a person *within* these changing states, properties, and actions."[129] The nature of that discernment, Frei continues, is a kind of informal recognition, a moment in which, observing someone "we say, 'That's him all right!'"[130] Thus, Frei's task is simply "to observe the story itself—its

[126] See Springs. Ibid., 32.
[127] Ibid., 31.
[128] Ibid., 100. Emphasis original.
[129] Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ,* 99. Emphasis mine .
[130] Identity 99. This does not indicate the self is a static thing. We are continually forced to radically reevaluate each other's continuity, Frei says. "But that very same person may reappear at another time in an action that is totally different in character from his previous behavior. Still this new action may be so important that we now say, 'What he did just now represents all that he now is.' Just for that reason we should then go on to say with astonishment, recalling the previous actions, 'My, how he's changed!'"

structure, the shape of its movement and its crucial transitions"—rather than to identify some mythical type, or moral option, or consciousness which Jesus's story discloses.[131]

In Frei's reading, the gospel story can be broken into three sections and it is in the finale—the crucifixion and resurrection—that we may say of Jesus "That's him all right!" In the first stage identified by Frei, Jesus is identified by larger narratives. Through his birth stories, genealogies, and all that takes place before his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus is given character by his representation of the people of Israel.[132] In the next stage, from Jesus' baptism to the time when he "sets his face toward Jerusalem," Jesus "appears in a limited way as an individual in his own right" though "he is still the one who fulfills the prophecies concerning Israel."[133] And even here his identity is determined in a new way by his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Finally, in the events of the Last Supper and especially the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus comes to the fore as a unique individual in his own right. It is here, Frei says, that the story is "most clearly history-like."[134] He continues,

> He and his actions and the events converging on him are not simply representative or symbological. They are what they are quite unsubstitutably and gain all their significance from being this specific series of linked circumstances and no other. He alone is at their center and lends them their character, so that they can focus neither on any other hero, human or divine, nor on that 'everyman' for whom he might mistakenly be thought to be a symbol.[135]

In this stage, Jesus re-establishes his connection with all the symbols and titles that had previously identified him—as Messiah, prophet of the Kingdom of God, Son of Man, etc.—but now *he* lends them identification, precisely as he *submit*s to God's will.[136] "He claims them for

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[131] Ibid., 133.
[132] Ibid., 165-6.
[133] Ibid., 167.
[134] Ibid., 169. "In the sense that that it describes an individual and a series of events in connection with him that, whether fictional or reals, are what they are in their own right."
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 171.

himself in his very identity as Jesus of Nazareth."[137] He defines what it means to be the Messiah of Israel through his cross and resurrection. Jesus does all this, "he becomes who he is in the story" by "consenting to God's intention and by enacting that intention in the midst of circumstance that devolve around him as the fulfillment of God's purpose."[138]

Even more specifically, it is in the resurrection—more than in the crucifixion—that Jesus does all this, and it is thus here that the reader is forced to reckon with who Jesus is. In the resurrection "he was most of all himself, and here most fully manifest as the individual, Jesus of Nazareth." He continues, "At the end of the story, as at its beginning, there is full identity between Jesus and Israel. But whereas at the beginning it was the community that served to identify him, the reverse is now the case."[139]

What follows from this reading of the Gospel stories Frei contends, is the reality that "we cannot know who he is without having him present."[140] Though Frei later regretted somewhat his emphasis on "presence," his meaning—at first—is straightforward.[141] In short, given that the climax of the story and the crux of Jesus' identity revolve around his having been raised from the grave, if the Jesus of the Gospels is real, he must now be present to us. "The being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable."[142] This must all the more be the case if Jesus gives meaning not only to his community, but also to life itself—the Gospel of John suggests in Jesus' various statements, most principally, "I am the

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[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 149.
[139] Ibid. Interestingly, Frei also makes the claim that "In contrast to the Gnostics with their savior myths and to the similar traditions of modern idealist and existentialist philosophy, the story of Jesus represents at its very core an insistence that because there is at least one man, Jesus, who has an identity others have identities also; for he, as the first of many brothers, gained that possibility for them in dying and rising in their behalf." 173.
[140] Ibid., 67.
[141] In a preface to *Identity* a few years after he wrote it, Frei said, "I would not now put nearly the same stress on 'presence' as a category. It is, among other things, deeply implicated in the twin dangers of a mystification and a of loss of morality to religion which result from making personal acquaintance or personal knowledge the model for what transpires between God and man in religion or Christian faith" Ibid., 53.
[142] Ibid., 179.

resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).[143] "How can he who constitutes the very definition of life be conceived of as the opposite of what he defines? To think of him dead is the equivalent of not thinking of him at all."[144] Frei goes on, in commenting on the question of historical fact, to suggest that "if the resurrection is true, it is unique, but if it is false, it is like any other purported fact that has been proved false" but "until such evidence comes along, however, it seems proper to say that there is a kind of logic in a Christian's faith that forces him to say that disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus is rationally impossible."[145] Though Frei has more to say about the nature of the presence of Christ, this is, in short, what he means by saying, "knowing his identity is identical with having him present or being in his presence" and why he insists, further, that identity description comes before discussion of presence in any fruitful account of Jesus of Nazareth.[146] For Frei, then, Jesus is most of all the one who is sure in his identity, enacting the will of God, and *in whose identity* all others find their identity. In reading the accounts of the resurrection in the gospels, we will quite plainly know who Jesus is, and be faced with the change such knowing entails.

From Realistic Narrative to Literal Sense

Jason Springs has noted in his recent book on Frei that Frei moved away somewhat from his use of "realistic narrative," and toward a more community-dependent description of the "literal sense" (from the Latin, *sensus literalis*) of Scripture, in the latter part of his life.[147] In later years, Frei cast some doubt on the possibility of describing the genre of the Bible because this located the Bible as a "regional variety" of a global category, and he turned instead toward

[143] Ibid., 180
[144] Ibid., 180.
[145] Ibid., 183. "But whether one actually believes in the resurrection is, of course, a wholly different matter….Why some believe and others do not is impossible for the Christian to explain. All he can do then is to recall that the logic of his faith makes it rationally impossible for him not to believe." 183.
[146] Ibid., 53, 67.
[147] Jason Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

speaking of the "literal sense" of Scripture as the ways that Christian communities have come to read Scripture, shaped by the centrality and realism of the stories about Jesus. In a later essay, titled, "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?" Frei suggests that such a reading—realistic, literal, or some other variety—will indeed "break" if it depends on a theory, but will bend and "stretch" if it is shaped around the practices of Christian communities. Frei still stood by "realistic narrative" as a helpful tool in understanding the biblical narratives as "a normative and pure 'meaning' world of its own, which…stands on its own with the authority of self-evident intelligibility."[148] However, he sought to distance himself from too thorough a use of narrative as a theory, for, "no matter how adequate or inadequate the theory turns out to be in actual exegetical application, the very possibility of reading those narratives under its auspices has to stand or fall with the theory's own viability in the first place."[149] This is the mistake, Frei suggests, of theoreticians of interpretation like Paul Ricouer and Hans Georg Gadamer, and "revisionist" theologians like David Tracy.[150] Indeed, he clarifies, "there may or may not be a class called 'realistic narrative' but to take it as a general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives and the partial second-order redescription in the doctrine of the Incarnation are a dependent instance is first to put the cart before the horse and then cut the lines and claim that the vehicle is self-propelled."[151] The option, for those who "may want to claim that a notion similar to 'second naiveté' is indeed meaningful, but not because it is part of or justified by any general theory" is to look to the

[148] Hans Frei, "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?," in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. Hunsinger and Placher, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 140.
[149] Frei, "The Literal Reading," 130.
[150] Interestingly, the strategies of such interpreters do not hold up well against the suspicious gaze of deconstructionists, Frei argues. "Deconsturction does provide a strong case against the theory at hand." "The Literal Reading," 136.
[151] Frei, "The Literal Reading," 143.

community that shows how this type of reading might work, and not to a theory that supports it.[152]

Springs narrates the shift in Frei even more starkly, arguing that Frei did in fact overuse narrative as a theory, but that Frei's later work continued and clarified his overall trajectory. Springs states, "despite Frei's own caution, 'realistic narrative' became a conceptual tool that risked overpowering the gospel story."[153] However, he, argues, the basic thrust of Frei's argument did not change—in terms of the importance of the stories themselves over any higher frame of reference—but rather shifted more directly onto the practice of Christian hermeneutics. "Frei discovered that he could make much the same point about these stories primarily in terms of a tradition of reading in Christianity that orbits around the concept of the *sensus literalis* or literal sense of the text."[154] That is, Frei's warrant for his claim about how the gospels are to be read shifted from an account of genre to a history of communal interpretation.

(He expressed even less certainty about the "literal sense" and said, in his posthumously published *Types of Christian Theology*, "It changes so much…that I'm, not at all sure I want to try and give a specific definition. It can't be done."[155] At one point he argues that the literal sense is simply the meaning with the most currency in the community.)

The reason for the priority of the literal sense in the Christian community seems to be that it is a community constituted first around the stories of the man Jesus, and the working out of this idea seems to be the most important part of the "literal sense."[156] Because the community was constituted around the story of Jesus, the "literal sense" has been the primary mode of

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[152] Frei, "Literal Reading," 137-9.
[153] Jason Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.
[154] Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy*, 39.
[155] Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992), 15.
[156] Frei. "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative," 121.

reading both in general as a way of reading stories *and also* in the sense that all other legitimate senses and meanings are to find deeper meaning in the literal events of that most important story, the events of the life of Jesus Christ. Thus Frei states, "By and large, except for the school of Origen in which the Old Testament received a kind of *independent* allegorical interpretation, allegory tended to be in the service of literal interpretation, with Jesus the center or focus of coherence for such reading."[157] Again, figural reading, as noted earlier, is understood to be a kind of "literal" reading, because of the manner of Jesus' centrality to the entire story sequence. Frei states, "An event real it its own right and a meaning complex and meaningful in its own right ore nonetheless understood to be incomplete, and thus figures of the event-and-or-meaning that fulfills them in the story of Jesus or in the universal story from creation to eschaton, of which it was the effectually shaping centerpiece."[158] The literal reading of the biblical narrative, then, emerges from the literal reading of the gospel stories about Jesus of Nazareth.

In his work on Frei, Springs also brings to the fore the somewhat scattered arguments in Frei's work that the reading of Scripture is itself a *participation* through re-enactment, in the biblical stories. "Those dwelling in Scripturally oriented communities may come to recognize themselves as figures within this story," Springs states, summarizing Frei.[159] This emphasis emerges most clearly in Frei's "A Meditation for the Week of Good Friday and Easter" which concludes *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. Frei states, "the shape of the story being mirrored in the shape of our life is the condition of its being meaningful for us," even though our lives only

[157] Ibid. Emphasis original.
[158] Ibid. In Mike Higton's words, "They are witnesses and embodiments precisely as the usubstitutably particular individuals they are." "The Fulfillment of History in Barth, Frei, Auerbach and Dante," in *Conversing with Karl Barth*, ed. John McDowell and Mike Higton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 120-41.
[159] Ibid., 58.

"reflect the story as in a glass darkly."[160] This certainly deepens Frei's contention that to know Jesus is to know him present.

Further, while Frei's work—especially his narration of the identity and presence of Christ—might at times be taken as a certain kind of text essentialism, Springs clarifies Frei's conviction that Scripture is properly revelatory only by the continuing action of God, not primarily by some separate, definable property inherent to the text. It is not through a particular style of reading coherent with the literary form of the text that Christ will be made present to us, but rather through the action of God in Christ (not that these two may not overlap). Frei states, on the last page of *Identity*, "The witness of Scripture to God is sure, not of itself, but because the witness of God to Scripture is faithful and constant."[161] This is a key ingredient, but easily overlooked, to Frei's work. Springs states, in fielding complaints from Nicolas Wolterstorff about the postliberal emphasis (especially in Lindbeck's work) on the biblical text "absorbing" the world, that Frei's notion of the of the relation between Scripture and world was, following Barth, rather unstable, and submitted itself to the ongoing work of God in Scripture.

> Fallibility and internal contradiction present problems only if one makes forceful claims for Scripture's absorption of the world. *Unidirectionality* invests Scripture with a kind of inflexibility that risk becoming an idolatrous displacement of the Word. It construes Scripture as a comprehensive scheme that will always and already position all other discourses and worldviews in its own terms. As a result, reconciling Scripture with events, information that does not derive directly from it, conflict with it, or reject subsumption….cannot but appear to compromise….If, by contrast, we recognize Scripture as an historically immanent means in and through which God's Word indirectly , but nevertheless authentically and realistically, manifests God, then the very notion of Scripture and the 'Christian world of discourse' acquire a certain flexibility and, perhaps more importantly, unpredictability.[162]

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[160] Frei, *Identity*, 199.
[161] Ibid., 194.
[162] Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy*, 73. Emphasis original. Springs goes on to suggest, as he does gently throughout the book, that this is "a primary point at which Frei's thinking bears out Barth's influence in a way that Lindbeck's does not."

Frei's position, like Barth's is that "Scripture presents a perspicuous, coherent, and 'followable world'" but it would be "a mistake to derive from its followability anything as systematic or as final as a 'biblical point of view.'"[163] To rigidly articulate such a worldview is to imprison divine freedom in human words and restrict the ability of Scripture to inspire, reform, and convict. Springs once again presents the issue with clarity. "It is thanks to the miracle that God wrought once for all (there and then) to which the gospel witnesses attest, and the miracle God continues to enact again and again (here and now) in and through that attestation, that we have what we need in the way of access to the reality of God."[164] Frei ties together the unpredictability of this double miracle in a response to evangelical theologian Carl Henry,. "Jesus refers, as does any ordinary name, but 'Jesus Christ' in a Scriptural sense does not refer ordinarily; or rather, it refers ordinarily only by the miracle of grace. And that means that *I do not know the manner in which it refers*, only that the ordinary language in which it is cast will miraculously suffice."[165] Human patience is the analogy of such attentive divine freedom.

[163] Ibid., 73-4.
[164] Ibid., 92. "This convergence of factors entails fact claims. But any such claims are uniquely conditioned by the subject matter." Ibid.
[165] Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology'" 211, 212. Quoted in Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy*, 92. Emphasis mine. Hauerwas makes a similar point. ""The Church returns time and time again to Scripture not because it is trying to find Scripture's true meaning, but because Christians believe that God has promised to speak through Scripture so that the Church will remain capable of living faithfully by remembering well. The more interesting the challenges facing the Church, the more readings we will need." *Unleashing the Scripture (*Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1993). 36-7.

Part III

Politics, Presence, and Scripture: Frei and Yoder[166]

> "One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life."[167]
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> "I do not understand the Bible. I study theology as… a solar eclipse in a shadow….By grace of abiding ignorance, it is always new to me. I am never not instructed."[168]

"To ask how the Bible functions in theology is like asking how the ground floor functions in a house. There are several possible right answers, and any one of them looks a little silly when spelled out."[169] I have little doubt that comparing the way two theologians address the role of the Bible in theology dramatically increases the danger of the silliness and abstraction perceived by Yoder here. Despite these dangers, I hope, in placing Frei and Yoder side by side, to accomplish several things. First, to sharpen my own critique of Yoder's interpretive strategies with Frei's historical analysis, and to imagine Yoder's response. Second, to show how Yoder's account of discipleship, community, and Scripture, and Frei's account of the demands of Scripture, and Christ, upon the reader, serve to illuminate each other. In tracing these connections out, I hope to develop further an account of patience as a practice of Christian

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[166] To my knowledge, the only other study to examine Frei and Yoder together is a chapter of Craig Carter's *The Politics of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001). In a chapter, "Yoder's Narrative Postliberal Christology," of this early summary of Yoder's work, Carter sought more or less to assimilate Yoder and Frei to each other. In Carter's broader argument, Yoder's similarities to Frei served as a means of securing Yoder's credentials with respect to classical Christology. One of Carter's theses is that Yoder's theology is "not a Mennonite theology, but a Christian theology" 17. While I think this is broadly right, his use of Frei seems largely procedural. Despite this, Carter notes one key flaw in Yoder's work—and I argue, Frei's—that Yoder paid little exegetical attention to the resurrection accounts, and that the resurrection, while highly theoretically important for Yoder, did not receive the requisite focus. "His affirmation of the reality of Jesus' resurrection is more implicit than explicit." 100.

[167] Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word of God*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1946) 96.

[168] Marilynne Robinson, "Psalm Eight," in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York, Picador,1998, 2005), 230-1.

[169] John Howard Yoder, "The Use of the Bible in Theology," in *To Hear the Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 77.

reading. In the process, I will point out a lack of exegetical attention to the Gospel stories of the resurrection in both Frei and Yoder, gesturing toward a final section in which I try to argue, by reading, for the difference that such attention makes.

I suggested, in my account of Yoder's way of reading Scripture, that his programmatic readings of Scripture sit uneasily with his articulation of the patience necessary for the life of the church. Frei's language enables a more precise complaint. In Frei's terms, Yoder's reading tended to place and explain Scriptural figures and event s in a wider world—often sociology—rather than describing the practices of the church by and within those Scriptural figures and events.[170] This is not to say that Yoder did not read carefully and attend to the historical and linguistic particulars of the texts he faced, rather that Yoder's often extraordinarily careful attention to such things proved the means by which those particulars were shown to be *representative* of the practices and attitudes with which he sought to confront Christian communities. At best, Yoder showed how following Jesus is bound up with a set of practices embedded in an ongoing relationship with Scripture. At worst, those practices eclipsed the "unsubstitutable individuality" of Jesus in his ongoing witness in and to Scripture read in the gathered community.

For Yoder, the unity of the canon consisted in its steady and consistent (in development) reference to a certain way of being in the world, defined by Christ, that the church is currently faced with embodying. Yoder suggests that the politics of the cross is that to which all Scripture points.[171] Part of the grounding of this sort of unity was, for Yoder, an emphasis on the original

[170] Bearing in mind Springs' attention to the flexibility of Frei's talk of the biblical world embracing and absorbing the wider world.

[171] Certainly Yoder makes a more compelling case that his politics comes *from* the biblical narrative, and must return to it, to remain faithful. This is most clearly true in Yoder's clear and consistent affirmation that this politics is founded in the historical event of Jesus' death and resurrection. Yoder would not fit my application of Frei's descriptions insofar as the political community itself points back the biblical text, unless that pointing seems to be self-referential. Or, put another way, this all depends on whether the community points to the cross and resurrection

intention of the Scriptural authors. John Nugent, in his work on Yoder's approach to the Old Testament, has effectively summarized Yoder's approach to Scripture as a whole as "canonical-directional." Nugent suggests that Yoder both preferred to "work with the final form of the canonical text" as a given, and that the Old Testament "should be interpreted as pointing to and finding its fulfillment in Christ."[172] In sum, Yoder, a "biblical realist," understood the best interpreters to be those who "approach Scripture with the best available tools for interpreting the author's original intention and trusting that that all the texts in their canonical form will hang together and present a coherent message."[173] Because of this emphasis on original intent, the unity of the canon, for Yoder, cannot be secured by figural or allegorical readings (Nugent, and Yoder, do not distinguish between the two). Nugent states, "Exegetes need not find allegorical ways to read Christ into the text; the text is already inseparably caught up in God's work in history which finds its fulfillment in him."[174] The unity of the biblical texts, in other words, consists in their steady (but not univocal—e.g. Israelite monarchy) and emerging revelation of the kind of life lived by Christ.

This is a crucial difference in hermeneutical strategy between Yoder and Frei. While Frei sought to contextualize the modern emphasis on authorial intention and illustrate its problems in relation to explicating the literal sense of Scripture in a community, Yoder maintained that "It is a general rule of proper textual interpretation that a text should be read for what its author meant to say and what its first readers or hearers would have heard it to say," and seemed to estimate

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as a disclosure of the kind of politics it must be, or a unique divine accomplishment—both are present in Yoder, and certainly the latter is theoretically predominant. Still, I think the movement that Frei describes here, to locate the meaning of Scripture in that history/experience/concept to which it points, is present in Yoder, just insofar as Yoder does *not, in principle*, need to read Scripture more than once—though he contends that we always must, in practice. There is, in other words, a single determinative reading of Scripture, for Yoder, which we may approach asymptotically.

[172] John Nugent, *The Politics of Yahweh*, (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 11.

[173] Nugent, *Politics*, 11. Nugent does not explore the apparent contradiction between a canonical approach and an authorial intentional approach.

[174] Ibid.

the possibility of biblical scholarship achieving that end (or rather its continued pursuit) quite highly.[175] (I remain puzzled that Stanley Hauerwas, influenced by both Yoder and Frei, has not acknowledged this significant difference between Yoder's insistence on the capacity and value of biblical studies for discerning the "original sense" of a text and Hauerwas' own repeated dismissals of this approach to theology and preaching.[176])

While this difference makes it somewhat difficult to adjudicate between Yoder before the prior disagreement is resolved, one way to compare the two is simply to place representative readings side by side, noting in advance my preference for Frei's emphases.[177] One intriguing example of Yoder's "canonical-directional" model that illustrates his approach to the unity of the canon is Yoder's interpretation of the Genesis 4 account of Cain and Abel. Karl Barth's reading of the same passage contrasts and aligns with Yoder's in illuminating ways.[178] Expositing Yoder's exegesis here will illustrate his approach again, which contrasts with Barth's figural

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[175] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 78. For example, Yoder updated *The Politics of Jesus* in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition to account for and respond to relevant changes in biblical studies. As noted earlier, Yoder saw the book as an attempt to summarize biblical scholarship, to state what "is now generally visible throughout New Testament studies." 2. Hauerwas notes that "I tried to convince John not to 'update' the scholarship since the original printing of *Politics of Jesus*….I thought such updating gave the impression that his readings of the texts depended on developments in historical scholarship." This is exactly what Yoder claimed, of course, and Hauerwas notes that he did not doubt his sincerity, but states that he did not think that what Yoder had accomplished in *Politics* was a summary of the scholarship. "Why 'The Way The Words Run' Matters," in *Working with Words,* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 101 n. 18.

[176] For Hauerwas on authorial intention see *Unleashing the Scripture (*Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1993). "There simply is no 'real meaning' of Paul's letters to the Corinthians once we understand that they are no longer Paul's letters but rather the Church's Scriptures" and even if "Paul could appear among us today to tell us what he 'really meant'…his view would not necessarily count more than Gregory's or Luther's account." 20. More recently, ""I assume even if the author was available he or she would have as much trouble saying what he or she intended as I would have trying to say what I intended by writing this paragraph…issues of 'authorship' are more complex than questions about 'intention.'" "Why 'The Way The Words Run' Matters," in *Working with Words,* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 99 n. 12."

[177] For an excellent discussion of the "literal sense" of Scripture in Aquinas and the necessity of an "ordered diversity of readings" governed by prayer—rather than a single, original sense—see Eugene Rogers, "How the Virtues of the Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 64-81.

[178] Frei's work can be seen, in part, as reflection on what made it possible for Barth to read the way he did. Springs recounts a story told to him in which Frei, responding to a student who asked why he never wrote a work of dogmatics, said, in reference to Barth, "That's already been done." *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 191 n. 57. Of course, like Barth's own work, dogmatics is never "done," but this is still a central way to understand the context of Frei's work—and it is why it is appropriate to use Barth in order to compare Yoder and Frei.

reading of the same passage. In a late essay on the story of Cain and Abel for a conference on environmental ethics, Yoder theorized that, though the text gives no reason for to have rejected Cain's sacrifice, and accept Abel's, as the story tell, we may hypothesize that Abel's lifestyle as a nomadic herder was gentler and more in line with God's intentions than was Cain's farming. He states,

> Cain had been going on doing what his father was condemned to do, namely tilling the soil, and offering some of its fruits in sacrifice. Therein his story prolongs organically that of chapter 3. Abel on the other hand is a throwback, for whose profession of herdsman the earlier narration provided no etiology. The shepherd who does not break open the soil, who shrewdly and submissively adapts his flock's movements to the vegetation that mother earth has already provided, is somehow "closer to nature" or "less fallen," less estranged from the original Edenic covenant, than the farmer. Cain was unwilling to recognize the priority of his brother's life style.[179]

Yoder goes on to note that, though Abel's lifestyle is inaccessible to us, it has a priority that demands our recognition—a recognition Cain refused to give.

> The sin of Cain—and therefore my sin, for we all live ultimately from breaking open the soil—was not that he tilled and harvested. It began when he refused to recognize that his brother Abel was closer to the beginnings and closer to the God of the natural than he was. But he deepened that offense and estrangement, and made it irrevocable, when he chose not to share in Abel's sacrifice of a sheep from the flock; instead, in a macabre parody of the killing of an innocent sheep, he sacrificed his innocent brother. That bloodshed made even his fields hostile to him.[180]

Yoder's concludes by tracing out God's persistence in turning human violence and vengeance in on itself to undermine that violence, when God nonetheless sets the disgraced Cain apart from humanity.

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[179] Yoder, "Cult and Culture In and After Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment*: *Conference Proceedings* (University of Wisconsin, 1992), 56-62. Certainly Yoder's context—at a conference on environmental ethics—played a role in his exegesis, yet it is the shape of his reading with his whole work which troubles me, not its particulars as an isolated reading.

[180] Yoder, "Cult and Culture In and After Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms."

Yoder's exegesis is both similar to and different from the figural reading of this passage given by Karl Barth—who is Frei's model for the possibility of exegesis appropriate to the biblical narrative in the contemporary world. For Barth, "the distinction between the two [Cain and Abel] is not based on any previous mark of distinction between them, but clearly and from the outset it rests on a decision of God concerning them."[181] What is similar about Yoder and Barth's readings is that Cain, the rejected, comes to witness God's special blessing. Barth says, "The determination of Abel…is a determination to death….It is that of Cain, of the man who is his brother's murderer and who, according to v.13, knows that the punishment which he has earned must be greater than he can bear, which is a determination to life." Cain and Abel serve as the beginning of Barth's exegetical footnotes in "The Elect and the Rejected," and both inseparably show how "It is a function of the many elect and the many rejected to indicate this love of God in its twofold nature. And the authorization under which the latter stand as well as the former is to live—in their differing functions—by the fact that God has loved and loves and will love this One, and them also in Him."[182]

Mike Higton, in an essay on Frei's analysis of Barth's use of figures in his interpretation of Scripture, has suggested that uniting the canon through figuration is a way of privileging the text over any framework external to it.

> The figural relationship is not an expression of some deeper worldly relation between the events which could be exposed with the right analytic techniques; there is no hidden variable to which the figural relationship is epiphenomenal;

[181] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. II/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975),, 340.
[182] Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 354. Paul Jones has argued that patience, for Barth, names the connection, visible above, between "God's being" and "the human action that God awaits." This is a patience that will not run out, "because on the cross God's patience has already run out, once and for all – and has done so in a way that assures us that God's patience is truly ongoing, truly provisionary of the time and space necessary for us to live into, and purposefully to inhabit, the covenant of grace. Paul Dafydd Jones, "On Patience: Thinking With and Beyond Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, (forthcoming). The end of his essay continues, "It is not sufficient for a theologian merely to say that humans are given time and space necessary to correspond to God….God's patience…is a rather more urgent affair. It confronts every one of us as an inbreaking future, provocative of missional and political action."

> what God does in Christ is not the activation or fulfillment of some prior potential within history which also lies behind the apparently diverse figures of Christ within history. If that were the case, then to establish the existence of the prior potential would be to find the *real* relationship between figure and figured, a real relationship of which the figural relationship was a secondary form.[183]

Despite the similarities between Yoder's work and Barth's work here on the way of God with humans, this comparison illustrates precisely the dynamic summarized by Higton.[184] The story of Cain and Abel are, for Yoder, taken up as Scripture insofar as it gestures towards the *kind* of human community desired by God and fulfilled in Christ. It is probably no accident Yoder highlights Abel's status as a herder, given his imagery of the church as living in exile in and for the nations. The connection thus made between Cain and Abel and Jesus is thus, in Higton's words, "the hidden variable of which the figural relationship is epiphenomenal." Yoder's reading is, on its own, helpful, creative, and not to be discarded. Yet when taken as part of his work as a whole, it serves only to fit into a particular slot of the trajectory already isolated by him.[185]

Higton, in fact, worries about the same problem in relation to Barth's exegesis. He asks, in noting the way Barth locates the pattern of election and rejection in his Old Testament exegetical work, "Is Barth finally substituting a pattern, a diagram, a conceptual scheme for the history-like narrative? Does his figural practice involve turning away from the unsubstitutable particularity of both figure and fulfillment at the last moment? "[186] Higton suggests that it does,

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[183] Mike Higton, "The Fulfillment of History in Barth, Frei, Auerbach and Dante," in *Conversing with Karl Barth,* ed. John McDowell and Mike Higton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 120-41. "If for instance, we were told that Abraham was a figure of Christ because he partially fulfilled the human possibility of God-consciousness which we see perfected in Christ, then that human possibility would provide the secret, subterranean connection between Abraham and Christ at which the figural relationship merely hinted."

[184] Yoder studied under Barth at the University of Basel. For an excellent critique of Barth's treatment of war, as well as for an account of the ever-reforming character of the church (more precisely, *Gemeinde*) in Barth's work, see Yoder's *Karl Barth and the Problem of War.*

[185] The same is true for Yoder's reading of the scattering after the tower of Babel as blessing, a fruitful reading that necessarily reduces the story in the context of his overall project, and the tension between that vision and other parts of the story like, say, the election of Israel. See "Meaning After Babble: With Jeffrey Stout Beyond Relativism" in *A Pacifist Way of Knowing*,(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 106-108.

[186] Higton, "The Fulfillment of History in Barth, Frei, Auerbach and Dante."

but that this is necessarily the case. "All figural exegesis"—and one might simply say "all exegesis"—"is bound to involve a moment of abstraction…it is inevitable to bracket at least some of the complexity that makes each pole particular."[187] But this "simply means that we cannot think of…exhausting the poles and must always accept the possibility of returning and re-reading the poles."[188] And this, Higton suggests, is exactly what Barth did, returning to the same texts throughout his work and finding different relationships between the same figures.

Yet all this is a reality of reading Scripture itself, and figural reading is not so much uniquely bedeviled with this issue as uniquely equipped to respond appropriately. As Higton says, Christian belief that the Old Testament is fulfilled in the in the New Testament "frees us *for* the Old Testament," frees us to be sent "back again and again to read the Old Testament 'in its own terms.'"[189] In short, Higton summarizes, "To claim that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of an Old Testament narrative is to commit to this endless paying of attention, this endless finding of patterns which partially confirm our commitment, this endless reading of the Old Testament narrative alongside the Gospels."[190] Yoder's exegesis is not problematic because he finds patterns in Scripture, it is problematic because the way those patterns are found through the focus on original intention and canonical trajectory makes it difficult to envision the breaking forth of yet more patterns—unlike, say, in most of Barth's reading.

How then, might Yoder respond to all this—the charge that Scripture, in his hands, can be eclipsed by the politics of the church? Perhaps a first response might be to suggest that a proper criticism of his work needs to provide alternative readings of the texts in question, and not simply quarrel about method. "Show me where I am wrong," Yoder might say. This indeed is

[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.

the sort of response Yoder sometimes offered to his critics, and he found warrant for it in that attitude of early Anabaptists. Yoder quotes Hans Denck as stating, "I may be wrong but I cannot be a heretic, since I am asking you to correct me."[191] This, we might say, is the stubborn patience that refuses to concede the issue ahead of time, and yet refuses to let that refusal necessitate a break in fellowship.

As my occasional references to Ephraim Radner have been intended to suggest, I think Radner provides just such a timely alternative reading demanded by Yoder's supporters in response to criticism like Ochs' and Sider's. Radner's figural reading permits the church to live into the shape Yoder has called it to, but to do so without eclipsing the perennial testimony of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. Diaspora politics (as we might summarize Yoder's work) can be embraced as gift and judgment in Radner's work, without that embrace turning into an iron grip.[192]

In the second place, Yoder might reply that his readings of Scripture were in service to the particular reforms of the church in the present day, and just so were both concrete and penultimate—not final. After all, Yoder read the story of Cain and Abel at more than one time, and for more than one purpose, just as Barth did.[193] The difficulty I have with Yoder's work on Scripture, in other words, may result from my inability to recognize the context and purpose of Yoder's writing. If Yoder's work were understood as opening up political readings, as showing how such readings are possible, and facing churches with that possibility, perhaps my difficulties

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[191] Yoder, "Patience as Method in Moral Reasoning" in *A Pacifist Way of Knowing*,(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 121 n. 15.

[192] As Hauerwas has winsomely put the issue, "it's not for me to tell Jews to think that exile is normative" but "I think at least for Christians it is." Hauerwas, "Blessed are the Peacemakers" in *Postliberal Theology and the Church Catholic*, ed., John Wright, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 108. This certainly does not mean that Jews and Christians have nothing to say to one another, as Hauerwas' own life suggests.

[193] See Yoder's "The Voice of Your Brother's Blood" in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985). Yoder does not make much of the difference of occupation between Cain and Abel here, his focus is on the way God turns the cycle of vengeance begun with Cain in on itself, protecting humans from their own violence. So here, again, is a trajectory that may point to his ecclesiology, yet it also points to the cross.

disappear. Bransen Parler, one of many recent commenters on Yoder's theological project has stated, in a recent essay, that "we should take Yoder as an expansionist (not a reductionist or antagonist) except in areas we have good textual or contextual reasons to do otherwise."[194] This seems a sensible application of the rule of charity to Yoder's work. If Yoder were to turn the question back on me, he might then ask, "must not any general reading, especially with specific reforms in mind, be impatient? Is what I call "patience" in fact a skepticism that simply plays into the sensibilities of my time and place?[195]

I imagine Yoder asking this question because I ask it of myself. I maintain—though aware of the dangers of such a reply—that Yoder's methods did eclipse Scripture in a more than routine way than this, and that different strategies would have served his ends better. It is possible to argue against particular readings, but since the difficulty lies in the constellation of Yoder's readings, the problem cannot be satisfactorily addressed only in this fashion. It is a problem of method. And it is this very constellation that worries me, because viewing Scripture as the unfolding of a particular politics plays precisely into the assumptions of a bourgeois North American church—liberal or conservative—in the early 21st century. In a procedural republic, the notion of church as procedural politics is exactly is too familiar and too tamable--especially in Yoder's (and my) Mennonite Church, which has increasingly parlayed its historic nonviolence into the trappings of a cultural vanguard.[196] Yoder's reading, challenging though it indeed is to North American Christianity, is, in a different sense, exactly what we want to hear.

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[194] Bransen Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn: Why Yoder is Not an Ethicist" in *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity After John Howard Yoder* ed. John Nugent (Abilene Press, 2010), 180.

[195] This is more or less the implication of Mark Nation's review of Chris Huebner's *A Precarious Peace*. Nation says, "It is important that we realize that our knowledge of the God revealed in Christ is in fact fairly solid." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82/2 (2008): 335. This echoes Yoder's "But We Do See Jesus," *Priestly Kingdom*.

[196] Part of my discomfort is summarized by Peter Dula's reflection on the turn to church in recent theology among "new traditionalists" like Yoder and Hauerwas. "None of this is exactly wrong. But I fear the answers come too quickly. I fear that the thesis—that for every problem that confronts the ethicist church is the answer—skips over some things that ought to be tarried with." *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford

Here again, Alex Sider summarizes the danger with great precision. The problem, for "Yoderians" is "How to allow the disavowal of Constantinianism to leave us stranded in our own historicity without strandedness itself becoming a handle on history?"[197] How, that is, does a community gathered around its Scripture submit itself to that Scripture without the form, the sincerity, of that submission becoming just another way to be in charge? How might the church patiently read Scripture without the form of that patience itself becoming a kind of impatience, a way of securing our rightness over against the rightness—ultimately—of the judged and judging one hanging on the cross?

Radical democratic theorist Romand Coles, in an essay on Yoder, both summarized this danger noted also by Sider and pointed a certain way forward—a way that looks surprisingly like a kind of confluence between Frei's work and Yoder's. In "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder: 'Outsiders' and the 'Otherness' of the Church," Coles remarks on the way that the distinctiveness of the church, in Yoder's work, is comprised exactly by the form of the church's openness to outsiders. Coles says, "the wisdom of the cross that teaches '*semper reformanda*' calls communities to open to the future by way of a never completed *dispossession*."[198] Yet Coles worries that this process might itself prove something else to be mastered by the elite few for the purposes of domination. "How," he asks, "would this root of always particular dissonances, discontinuities, dispossessions, and renewals within the tradition finally avoid being simply another standard (or method) beyond history that would endow with fundamentalist authority those who speak and act monologically in its name…? And might it not then…resembl[e] the very Constantinianism Yoder has so profoundly taught Christians to

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University Press, 2011), 202. One of his final musings in the book is that the "the warm welcome granted postliberalism and radical orthodoxy is directly connected to the collapse of confidence in the Left" 229.

[197] Sider, *To See History Doxologically*, 14.

[198] Romand Coles, "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder," *Modern Theology* 18/3 (2002): 310.

resist?"[199] Coles' answer is both profoundly at home in Yoder's thought and provides a link between the work of Yoder and Frei. He states, "*If* Yoder escapes this trap, it is because he understands the church's relation to Jesus as the very incarnation of practices of becoming vulnerable to encounter to the otherness of history."[200]

I suspect that Coles refers here to the vulnerability of the community before the Gospel texts. Going a bit further, with Coles, I want to suggest that Yoder and Frei might be brought together in the affirmation that the church's relation to Jesus—in Scripture, first, and also sacrament and community—resists closure.[201] The church is never "finished" reading the Gospels, not only because of human fallibility, but also because the demands of Christ, through the witness of Scripture, are new in every situation, and only concretized there, as Yoder has maintained. As I have already noted throughout this essay, the work of both Yoder and Frei has largely been about letting the world of the text—centered around the person of Christ—confront and challenge contemporary readers. One way of naming—at minimum—the thesis of Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* is his declaration that "it is quite possible to refuse to accept Jesus as normative; but it is not possible on the basis of the record to declare him irrelevant."[202] Indeed, *The Politics of Jesus* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* both work, in parallel ways, to challenge

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[199] Coles, "The Wild Patience," 310. Some of the hesitation Coles has about Yoder is a hesitation about the nature of the finality of the claim that "Jesus Christ is Lord." Coles: "[Yoder] appears not infrequently to suggest a singular end-point ("His ultimate victory") brought about by a distinctly cruciformed dialectic or, better, eschatology ("His hidden control"), that one might suspect would engender an overwhelming hubris in believers that could radically vitiate the very receptivity he otherwise cultivates," and further, "Could it be that jealousy of Jesus as Lord—not just as concept, but as stories, dispositions, habits, practices—is entwined with and works in spite of itself toward the closure of the church's generous and receptive participation in historical generativity?....This jealousy is not without its power and capacity for good work, but I would suggest it needs to be inflected differently and reshaped not only for the radical democratic community coalitions in which I am most invested, but the work that Yoder calls Good News." 323, 326. This is an important, but somewhat distinguishable, question from the issue at hand.

[200] Ibid., 310. Emphasis mine—for it is indeed an "if."

[201] "His presence, known in the breaking of the bread, becomes dynamic. He is constantly making himself available as a living interpreter of the texts so that we are able to find ourselves not stuck in either a positive or a negative group identity but constantly enabled to move on." James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001), 121.

[202] Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 97.

the reader to see again the immediacy of the judgment pressed upon them by reading the Gospels. And both Frei and Yoder also articulated the centrality of the gathered Christian community as the location in which that challenge is made concrete.

In illuminatingly different ways, both Yoder and Frei maintained the unity of discipleship and interpretation, or following Christ and knowing Christ. Yoder quoted the 16th C. Anabaptist Hans Denck's maxim that "No man can know Christ unless he follows after him in life."[203] Frei too highlighted the inseparability of knowledge and discipleship. He insisted that accepting the lordship of Christ in life was the same thing as acknowledging his having been raised from the dead. "Factual affirmation is completely one with faith and trust of the heart, with love of him, and love of the neighbors for whom he gave himself completely" and the "rejected of this world" with whom he "made his lot," and this is necessarily true "no matter how far short a person may fall in practice in respect to the one or the other or both."[204]

This parallel emphasis on the relationship between discipleship and knowing situates Yoder and Frei so as to see their similarities more clearly. But it is even more helpful to invert these emphases somewhat. What is most interesting here, between Yoder and Frei at their best, is the way that discipleship is not so much a precondition of encounter with Scripture, as it is a result of it. Yoder's claim that "The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect, but one of cross and resurrection" is in fact, in this light, a claim that the efficacy of Scripture is not so much in the formulae the people of faith effect through it, but the forming of that people into the likeness of

[203] Quoted by Yoder in "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" in *To Hear The Word* 2nd ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 236.
[204] Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 188.

Christ.[205] I want to say, "the relationship between the *reading* of God's people and the triumph of God's *interpretation* is not a relationship of cause and effect, but one of cross and resurrection." This is both to suggest that the triumph of right reading is out of our hands, and that right reading is itself a formation into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Here again we have a certain parallel, with differing emphases, in Frei's work. "The witness of Scripture to God is sure, not of itself, but because the witness of God to Scripture is sure and constant."[206] When Frei states this, at the end of *Identity*, he has just spoken of Scripture as an analogy of Jesus, the Word of God, whose life is a witness to God yet who, paradigmatically in the resurrection, "is witnessed to by the very God and the very Spirit to whom he witnesses."[207] I might rephrase Frei with a further analogy, saying "The witness of our *reading* to God is sure, not of itself, but because the Witness (of God) in Scripture is sure and constant." Readers of Christian Scripture are witnesses of Christ and witnessed to by Christ. Their reading is ensured, pointed toward, and formed bodily into Christ and Christ's way. To read properly is to be formed into the image of Christ.

Yet this is also to be held off, at a distance from the end and guarantee of our reading. Frei notes the dialectic in discipleship between imitation and, for lack of a more appropriate word, witness. "The Church," Frei writes "has no need to play the role of 'Christ figure.' Rather, it is called upon to be a collective disciple, to follow at a distance the pattern of exchange, serving rather than being served, and accepting (as the disciple, as differentiated from his Lord) the enrichment given to him by his neighbor."[208] While this distancing might seem suspect to those, like myself, trained by Yoder to vigilance against attempts to distance the

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[205] Yoder, *Politics*, 232. This quote is an anchor of my appreciation for Yoder. Yet I find the more I read and use it the less I know what it means. I do not know whether to be encouraged or discouraged by this.
[206] Frei, *Identity*, 194.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid., 191. .

church from the demands of discipleship, it need not be so condemned, for it is not a *rejection* of the cross's normativity, but the assertion that disciples of Christ do not have the power to make Christ present by our own exertion. We only live into that pattern obscurely, "as through a glass darkly," and are only able to do so because of Jesus' accomplishment, "once for all." As Frei says, "Reenactment can no more make him present than the passage of time can bear him away."[209]

This is all the truer if, as Yoder says, reiterating the New Testament conviction, "Jesus Christ is the same today, yesterday, and forever." Surely it is then the case that it is part of the vocation of the historian, and the theologian, to "trace the sameness of Jesus across the generations."[210] But this is a sameness that will be difficult to specify ahead of time, for it is held together by Jesus' life and death and the power of his resurrection, and not by a "deeper" structural similarity, whether of a particular politics, or a particular figural reading.[211] As Radner states, "Patience, by definition, cannot manipulate the facts of history. The mystery of the Holy Spirit is that these facts, embodied by the Church, have been let loose for Christ alone to order as he in fact has ordered.[212]

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[209] Ibid., 200. Emphasis original. "Indeed, even our life shaped by his story is no final clue to his identity and presence, but only a mirror of his story. The crosses of Christ's many brothers and sisters are not identical with his cross, any more than the shape of our life is identical with the shape of the events of this week in the Gospels. Why not? Because he lives to God—not to time in which he recedes from us, nor to the obliteration or annulment of time, in which he would be present now in the representation of his story. He does not live in or by his distance from or his presence to us: He lives to God. That is his life, not ours, or rather ours only in him…Even his cross, though mirrored in the innumerable crosses of the sons of men, is his own, and bids us keep our distance." 200. Emphasis original.

[210] Yoder, "Historiography as a Ministry to Renewal," 216.

[211] This is not to equate figural and political readings—see my earlier argument that figural reading gives space for Scripture's polyphonic intertextuality—nor is it to suggest that figural reading cannot be political—that is to misunderstand what it means to be "political." The kind of reading Yoder does in "But We Do See Jesus" is both figural and political.

[212] Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church,* 354. He concludes his work, just after this, "O Church of Jesus! Your servants love her very rubble and are moved to pity even for her dust! (Ps. 102:14)."

Conclusion: Reading like Mary

In sum, what we find at the heart of the work of Yoder and Frei is that the proper end of Scripture's reforming power is the transformation of readers according to the image of Christ.[213] In reading the Gospels, and in perennially re-reading the rest of Scripture in light of them, readers meet and are transformed by the Jesus who meets them there. The question is not how Jesus can be made present, but "whether—when he meets us in our world…we want to follow him. We don't have to, as they didn't then. That we don't have to is the profoundest proof of his condescension, and thereby of his glory"[214]

Daniel Hardy summarizes something quite suggestive of all of this in his *Wording a Radiance*. In a striking section inclusive both of Yoder's concerns for Scripture's reforming power and Frei's work to state that power in its own terms, Hardy says,

> Scripture heals through the way that we are 'Scriptured,' or drawn into a process of re-generation that imitates the very process that generates our Scriptures. In the gospel, we see the people following Jesus as he wanders around Palestine; they refind their identities as, following him, they come to participate in the process that generates gospel.[215]

Here we see Scripture operating through the formation of individuals and communities as they walk with Christ through the pages of Scripture—a formation all the more efficacious, I imagine, for its not being propositional.[216]

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[213] This imagery and language taps into much a much broader stream of Christian piety. It would be fascinating to investigate the connections between a work like Thomas a Kempis, his *The Imitation of Christ* (and other forms of late Medieval piety), the diverse reforming impulses of the 16th century, including Anabaptism, and later Pietist movements.

[214] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 39.

[215] Daniel Hardy, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 64. Peter Ochs reads Hardy here, and Ephraim Radner in his recent *A Brutal Unity*, as implicitly claiming that "the Logos is not a conceptual universal, but a word that moves from place to place by walking from person to person rather than by casting conceptual nets beyond the reach of the caster's hand." Peter Ochs, "The Way Sabbath Complements the Workday: A Response to Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity*," American Academy of Religion Session, 2013.

[216] Robert Jenson's discussion of atonement theory and the crucifixion makes illuminating gestures in this direction. He states, "what is first and principally required as the Crucifixion's right interpretation is for us to tell this story to one another and to God as a story about him and ourselves…One is strongly tempted to say: what must above all

Another helpful image of this comes from David Ford's *Self and Salvation*. Ford's work revolves around the image of faces, and especially the face of Christ. Ford states, in a way quite reminiscent of Frei, "To believe in him is to know that one is living before his face."[217] Perhaps, as an analogy of Christ, Scripture might be understood as the suffering face of Christ on the cross, an indexical sign that impels our response to the face of the suffering body before us. [218] This is surely to renew and reconfigure the figural relationship between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the Church and indeed to see Mary—saying "yes" to Gabriel's call, and standing at the foot of the cross to watch the world's "no"—as the model of discipleship. To read Scripture, then, is to be formed into the likeness of Christ, but also to stand off and watch, helplessly. This tension, the tension between the disciple looking on Jesus on the cross, and the disciple following Jesus onto the cross is one way of stating what has been at the heart of this essay. The space between these two, in the church's "relation to Jesus" which we call discipleship, might be filled with what Coles calls "the very incarnation" of encountering the "otherness of history."[219]

So, patience is waiting like Mary before the face of Christ who remains ever in the church's view as it reads Scripture. Patience dare not eclipse that face, or the concreteness of his challenge and their obedience. The patient community and the patient reader cannot, while

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happen, to understand reconciliation at Golgotha, is that the church recite the passion narrative…One is tempted to say: what fundamentally must happen in the church, as right interpretation of the Crucifixion, is that the Good Friday liturgy…be celebrated." Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I*, 189-190.

[217] David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 171.

[218] I am grateful to conversations with Peter Ochs for this image of Scripture as sign, and suffering. Hauerwas' recent reflections on suffering also complement this view. "We dare not forget that at the center of our faith is a wounded animal: the Lamb of God. An animal wounded by identification with us that we might be what we were created to be, that is, creatures captivated by the joy found through the worship of a God who refused and refuses to overwhelm our violence with violence." "Bearing Reality: A Christian Meditation," Presidential Address to the Society of Christian Ethics, Washington D.C., January 6, 2012. This essay appears in Hauerwas' *Approaching the End*, but this passage is not included.

[219] Or it might, as Rowan Williams has recently articulated, be a way of "making things strange to prompt a new level of recognition." "Extreme Language: Discovery Under Pressure," from Lecture 6 of *Making Representations: Religious Faith and the Habits of Language*, Gifford Lectures, 2013.

facing Christ, escape the pursuit of his way, even as that way remains ever up ahead and at a distance from our imitation.

Yet what makes it possible to read in this way is not the crucified Christ, but the risen crucified Jesus. This twists the dialectic of disciplined hermeneutics yet further. As Robert Jenson has written, the "decisive difference between a living person and a dead one is that the former can surprise us as the latter cannot" so "if Jesus lives, he is an agent in my life, and on whom I must expect to act freely, whom I could know perfectly and yet not always anticipate."[220]

Both Yoder and Frei failed to pay a great deal of attention to the resurrection, even though it remained conceptually central to their work. Though Frei maintained that Jesus became who he really was in the resurrection accounts, he never paid much attention to the particulars of the gospel accounts, as he did to the crucifixion and other key points. At one point he states only that the ambiguity of Jesus identity and relation to God is "resolved in the resurrection account."[221] Yoder's reading of the Gospel of Luke in *Politics* narrates a resurrection account only once and then only as a way to underscore the finality of the cross, or as he states, "the cross is not a detour on the way to the kingdom…nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it *is* the kingdom come".[222] The resurrection, here, is but a confirmation of Jesus' ministry, and little besides. This seems like a wasted opportunity for reflection on the very origins of Christian community.

Greater emphasis on the resurrection accounts might have salutary effects on the reception of both Yoder's work and Frei's. In Yoder's work, an emphasis on the resurrection

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[220] Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume I The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 198. Conversely "Socrates, although he remains dead, is still powerful. But if I am surprised by him, this is because of previously inadequate knowledge."
[221] Ibid., 31.
[222] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 51. Emphasis mine.

could actually strengthen the case for the political reality of the gospel, while undermining any sense of self-sufficiency or completion that political readings might tend towards.[223] Close attention to the resurrection stories might also open the door to more figural interpretation of Scripture in Yoder's work, for the Christ who is clearly standing over against the church cannot easily be eclipsed. A hermeneutic that relied more on figures—the figures of Christ, Church, Israel, empty tomb, cross, Mary, Eve, Abraham, Joshua, Ruth, temple—to knit together the canon, and less on sociological articulations of the kingdom of God would resist better the abstractions of individuals, lend itself more easily to communal discernment, and perhaps even provide new ecumenical resources for renewed discipleship. Though this work has been both more critically and constructively focused on Yoder, a similar emphasis might occasion analogous correction in Frei. The strangeness and unrecognizability of the risen Christ is difficult to assimilate to any hermeneutical theory, and whatever tendencies in Frei's work in such directions might be restrained by this refusal to be recognized.

If this essay has any value, it will be in clarifying and furthering the challenge Yoder and Frei put to readers of the gospels. In analogous ways, both Frei and Yoder rendered that challenge decisively for the contemporary church, especially in North America, and yet attempted to show how that renewal was but one of the many reforming possibilities of Scripture, only concretized in a particular times and places. If Yoder, as I have argued, failed to read like a reformer and failed to be reformed, this further suggests the necessity of the kinds of reform he championed. It also shows, as the penultimate section of this essay will also imply, how important it is that the reading of Scripture be communal. If this essay has any enduring benefit, I hope it will be to engender a keener, more discerning patience among such readers.

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[223] Rowan Williams' *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel,* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), does just that and pairs curiously well, I have found, with Yoder's *Politics*.

Excursus

A Note on Yoder's Sexual Abuse

> "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"[224]

It has been a great challenge of my academic life to integrate my appreciation for Yoder's writings with the abuse and harassment he visited on a number of women over the latter part of his career. His writings show so compellingly how the practice of peace is not merely something to affirm but to embody in relationships, communities, and even, as I have tried to show, ways of reading. How then, could such a theologian engage in the kinds of manipulation and unwanted and even threatening levels of physical touch that have been confirmed by the women who have come forward during his career and after his death?[225] It is a tired and awful story—especially among men off influence—and more awful for being so common.

Among those of us who believe that Yoder's writings might still bless Christian communities—not least in ways that make them better able to respond in love and discipline to lives like his—most writers end up separating his life and his work, in practice, while paying lip service to the inseparability of walk and word. Most scholars of Yoder who are sensitive on this issue are quick to point out that theory and practice are inextricably connected, and that peace, in Yoder's view, must be witnessed to, not argued for. But this necessary maxim too often turns

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[224] Jeremiah 23:29 I cannot quite say why this verse seemed to fit just here. Perhaps it is because of the suggestion that God's truth is effective. Yet there is also the disconcerting image of brokenness that comes from abuse of all kinds. Further, there is an echo here between "word like fire" and the disciples' "were not our hearts burning within us?" of Luke 24.

[225] Terminology is important yet fraught with peril here. Yoder did not rape anyone, which seems an important distinction to make, but one difficult to maintain without appearing to defend him or diminish the suffering of those he harassed and abused. Details covered by the Elkhart Truth can most conveniently be found archived at <http://peacetheology.net/john-h-yoder/john-howard-yoder's-sexual-misconduct--part-five-2/>

into a kind of excuse that allows us to just go on writing about Yoder as usual, whenever we move on from our required protests.

That is more or less what I have done in this essay. It is difficult for me to imagine a more integrated approach. I regret this. Yet I wonder if, after acknowledging and facing Yoder's abuse in the fullest sense—and indeed a fuller sense than I have allowed here—I am not properly forced to silence about it. As a white man of great privilege, I fear anything I say about this—and so much else—might just be more space in which to construct more and more intricate forms of permission to continue to go on as before. More importantly, it is more and more space in which the voices of victims are not heard. With such silence in mind, I give the last word of this essay to the Gospel of Luke in the hopes of learning from Jesus how to be patient in a world of injustice, and finally from Mary, the first witness of the resurrection, to see what it can look like to stand patiently before that Jesus.

Epilogue

The Risen Christ, His Body, and the Words of Scripture

> "Patience comes not just from our inability to have the other do our will…it arises with the love that the presence of the other can and does create in us."[226]

I offer at the end of these pages some reflections on Luke 24, the Emmaus Road story in which Jesus walks with his disciples and interprets Scripture with and for them. The scene is this: Jesus has died, been buried by Joseph of Arimathea, and "some women who had come with him from Galilee" had followed Joseph and prepared spices to anoint Jesus' body. [227] After this, they observed the Sabbath, "according to the commandment." When these women returned to Jesus' grave after the Sabbath, the stone had been rolled away, the tomb was empty and "two men in dazzling clothes" told them that Jesus had risen, just as he had spoken. When the women returned to the apostles, "these words seemed to them an idle tale," but Peter ran to the tomb, saw its emptiness, and was "amazed" (24:4, 11, 12).

It is in the context of this amazement and speechless unbelief that Jesus appears to two disciples who "on that same day" were on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:15-16). When Jesus asked the them what they were discussing, the two "stood still, looking sad," then Cleopas, one of the two, voiced their confusion, telling this stranger on the road about "Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet…and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel….Moreover, some women of our group astounded us…and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those

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[226] Stanley Hauerwas, with Charles Pinches, "Practicing Patience: How Christians Should be Sick" in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 365.
[227] Luke 23:55. All further biblical quotations will be noted parenthetically.

who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him" (24:17-25).

Strikingly, the two disciples in this story have all the pieces of the narrative in place. They know *what* happened, even including the resurrection, but they do not know *why*.[228] It is Jesus, walking beside them, who provides this ordering. "Then he said to them, 'Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'" And, "beginning with Moses he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (24:25-27). And yet it is only later, when these disciples invite him to the evening meal and he shares bread with them that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" and, at the same moment, "he vanished from sight." (24:30-31). Further along in the story yet, it is only when these disciples have rushed back that very night to share the news with the disciples in Jerusalem and Jesus has stood among them once more, eaten some fish, and spoken again, that "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" and so named them "witnesses of these things" (24: 45, 48).

What do we do with a story like this? Certainly, we must say, with Yoder, that the disciples have failed to grasp the significance of the cross, of self-sacrifice, for the Messiahship of Jesus. Certainly we must attend to the way hospitality and Eucharist are intertwined with right knowledge of Scripture and the sight of Christ. We must attend to the way that "he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24:35). However, I want to suggest something more. Perhaps this story is not about Jesus' helping the disciples to finally get it right

[228] I am indebted, in my reading of this story, to countless sermons and particularly to Peter Dula who made this point about the knowledge of the disciples at a baccalaureate sermon at Eastern Mennonite University on April 30, 2011. If, as Stanley Hauerwas has repeatedly said—and fittingly, I cannot recall where—"originality is just forgetting where you read it" then little here has been original.

so that the church can get off the ground without yet another hitch. Perhaps this story is about Jesus' perseverance with his people as they attempt to go on, to walk to the next town after disaster strikes, to keep telling the stories of Jesus in our incomprehension, to keep breaking bread and sharing meals when all taste has fled from the food.

Whatever patience is, this is what it *looks* like. The patience demanded of the faithful community is the patience of its Lord who does not abandon them to their helplessness even when, appearing in his flesh, "they were disbelieving and still wondering" even "in their joy"(24:41). It is a patience that lets us tell the story of Scripture before saying, in love, "Oh, how foolish you are" (24:25). It is a patience that will send them the Spirit of comfort "my Father promised" (24:49). The Patient One, like love, we might say with Paul, "rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Corinthians 13:7). We become patient as we watch this patience, and, in watching, are formed to the patience of Christ who says "see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (24:39).

This patience has a politics too. At the end of the story the disciples gather together at the temple in Jerusalem, and already there are echoes of the later testimony that "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). There is an implicit challenge to the reader to be a part of this community, or not. There is also, in the apostles' easy dismissal of the women's testimony ("these words seemed to them an idle tale") the bitter tang of sexism. Read in this light, Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus might even look like a rebuke for their unbelief, their inhospitality. Christ stands over against the politics of the community, calling, guiding, walking and eating, but in all this remaining other than the disciples and their shared life.

So, the patience of Christ is a patience that waits, and holds off a little while. On the Emmaus Road, Jesus is patient enough to remain a distance from the disciples, to hold himself back, to be both friend and stranger, disappearing dinner guest and traveling companion, so as to bring his followers "to Jerusalem with great joy" that "repentance and forgiveness of sins " might be proclaimed in his name to all nations," beginning there. (24:52).[229]

How in good conscience can an essay on patience hope to end by a straightforward reading of Scripture in support of my thesis? How am I being confronted by Scripture, by Christ, without muffling and transmuting that confrontation into a discourse with which I am comfortable? Whatever else I may say about the warrants for my reading, or the inexhaustibility of the story, what secures my reading—and it is not a static security—is not the arguments for it, or the theory behind it, but the practice of meeting Christ, in community, in the text. In that sense, the question is always before us.

The sight of Christ is always a challenge, yet a challenge we cannot always see clearly. As Yoder says—and, with difficulty, we must hear his words speak to his own life as well—"we still do not see that the world has been set straight. We still have no proof that right is right….'*But we do see Jesus*, revealing the grace of God by tasting death for everyone."[230] We still do not see, or we see only through a glass darkly, why it was "necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory" (24:26). We faithfully work out which ways of saying it are better and worse, which rules we need to keep us from saying what we have discovered we ought not say. But "we still have no proof." So once again Christ meets us on the road and "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" interprets to us "the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (24:27). Once again he is "made known" to his people "in the breaking of

[229] Jesus' strangeness in the resurrection accounts, especially in Luke and John, has seen most eloquent attention in Rowan Williams *Resurrection*, to the spirit of which I am also most clearly indebted.
[230] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 38. Yoder is partially quoting from the book of Hebrews.

bread," in the feasts of his hospitality. Once again we realize—after the fact, the moment, the glimpse—how "our hearts were burning within us while he was talking to us on the road" (24:32).

In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is the first of the witnesses to the resurrection. She stands outside the tomb and sees her risen Lord, "but she did not know that it was Jesus" (20:14). She supposes instead, the text says, that he was "the gardener," a mistake that inescapably brings to mind an earlier garden, another dawn, a different mourning. Then Jesus says her name: "Mary!" (20:16). And then she knows him, and the shroud of strangeness falls from his face: "Rabbouni!"[231] But when she turns to embrace him there is another surprise and Jesus says—I can imagine her pain—"Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17). Perhaps in heeding this advice, in letting Jesus be the stranger that he so often is in the gospels, the lives of those caught up in his story might come more closely to resemble his—in patient politics and patient reading. For it was only without "holding on to him" that Mary could return to the disciples and declare to them, "I have seen the Lord" (24:18).

[231] "The crucial instant in which the stranger who appears to have robbed or deprived or diminished ('If you have carried him away…') is revealed as savior is the utterance of the particular and personal *name*." Williams, *Resurrection*, 38. Emphasis original.

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