The War of the Lamb

The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking

John Howard Yoder

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Introduction: Jesus Is No Sectarian

John H. Yoder’s Christological Peacemaking Ethic

GLEN HAROLD STASSEN

The War of the Lamb presents surprises for readers whose perception of John Howard Yoder is based on stereotypes of Mennonites or of Yoder. He planned this book himself, before his sudden death in 1997. So The War of the Lamb—its plan as a whole as well as most of the individual essays—represents Yoder’s own intention and is a true development of his own thought. Of course, indications pointing toward these developments can be found in his earlier publications, since Yoder was incisively logical and logically coherent. But in several ways, these ideas develop beyond what many people associate with the thought of John Howard Yoder.

Arguing on the Basis of Effectiveness

Yoder is well known for arguing on behalf of an ethics of faithfulness rather than effectiveness.1 In The War of the Lamb, however, he describes how Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King had a “cosmological conversion,” in which they each saw God as the ruler of the universe. Therefore, they believed that action faithfully in tune with God’s rule is likely to be more effective. Yoder agreed. He himself had a cosmological and eschatological faith in the lordship of Christ. It was grounded in his own Christ-centered Mennonite faith and strengthened by his doctoral study with Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann. Yoder noticed
the theme of God as ruler of the universe and highlighted it in Tolstoy and King because it was a central theme in his own faith; he also saw something analogous in Gandhi. In *The War of the Lamb*, he writes:

To say “the means are the ends in process of becoming” is a cosmological or an eschatological statement. It presupposes a *cosmos*—a world with some kind of discernible moral cause-effect coherence. Unlike Kant, for whom the hereafter was needed to make the moral accounting come out even, this view claims coherence within history. But for this claim to work, one must believe that in some sense suffering is redemptive, or (as King will say it) “there is something in the universe that unfolds for justice.” For Gandhi, that cosmic validator was the great chain of being, represented literally or at least symbolically by the notion of reincarnation. For King it was the black Baptist vision of another Moses leading his people from Egypt, another Joshua fighting at Jericho, a promised land we can see from the mountain top, a cross on Golgotha from which one can see the heavens opening. King also said it in terms of the American dream, the humanism of the fathers of the republic, and even in terms of the federal politics of the Kennedy brothers.²

To say with King that “love is the most durable power in the world,” or that “there is something in the universe that unfolds for justice,” is not to claim a sure insight into the way martyrdom works as a social power, although martyrdom often does that. It is a confessional or kerygmatic statement made by those whose loyalty to Christ (or to universal love, or to *satyagraha*) they understand to be validated by its cosmic ground. Suffering love is not right because it “works” in any calculable short-run way (although it often does). It is right because it goes with the grain of the universe, and that is why *in the long run* nothing else will work.³

If your rejection of violence is cosmically based, as for Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King—i.e., if its validation is not pragmatic—the impact of that kind of commitment will in fact be greater effectiveness. Perseverance in the face of sacrifice and creativity in the face of dismay are heightened for those who believe that the grain of the universe is with them.⁴

Yoder here makes several arguments that nonviolent action is usually more effective than violent action. In addition, he argues insightfully for accurate, balanced ways of assessing that comparative effectiveness. He is not giving up effectiveness; he is restoring it to its proper, but limited, place within sound theological and eschatological ethics.

Yoder writes that the last chapter of *The Politics of Jesus*, which argued for faithfulness over effectiveness, unsettled some readers because they erroneously thought it was a call for withdrawal from social involvement. It was “offensive to contemporaries because it seemed to some to constitute an *argument* to the effect that even in other times and settings, such as our own, withdrawal from
social involvement” was mandated. “It was not that, as my other writings make clear,” Yoder writes, “but it is fascinating that readers thought so.”

**Refuting Reinhold Niebuhr’s Marginalizing of Pacifism**

Reinhold Niebuhr marginalizes nonviolence. He says nonviolence is idealism without responsibility for effectiveness. He writes of “the failure of liberal Protestantism to recognize the coercive character of political and economic life. To refuse the use of any coercive methods means that we do not recognize that everyone is using them all the time, that we all live in and benefit or suffer from a political and economic order that maintains its cohesion partially by the use of various forms of political and economic coercion.” Niebuhr argues from the need for coercion to the need for force, and then violence, and then war (often eliding these different categories into one). He argues that “responsible” Christian ethics must recognize this need in national policy. For national policy, we need to be pragmatic, and to have a strong sense of sin, the tragic, and the ambiguous. Thus, as Yoder has pointed out, the test that Niebuhr applies to Christian ethics is its adequacy for national policy, not for Christian witness in churches. By contrast, Yoder shows ways that nonviolent witness can claim “responsible” political involvement, over against Niebuhr as well as over against sectarian ethics of withdrawal.

Niebuhr sees Christian pacifism as based on a legalistic absolute—love as pure unselfishness, nonresistance, or nonviolence, absolutistically understood. “Religious absolutism in its pure form is either apocalyptic or ascetic. In either case, it is not compatible with political responsibility. When apocalyptic, as in the thought of Jesus, it sets the absolute principles of the coming Kingdom of God, principles of uncompromising love and nonresistance, in sharp juxtaposition to the relativities of the economic and political order and assumes no responsibilities for the latter.” “It knew that [the effort to achieve a standard of perfect love] could only be done by disavowing the political task and by freeing the individual of all responsibility for social justice.” But moral absolutes have no place in the necessary pragmatism of public policy, Niebuhr says. “We can find no stable absolute in the shifting situation of the social struggle where everything must be finally decided in pragmatic terms.”

Yoder breaks this stereotype at four key points:

1) Christian ethics is for the witness made by churches. The test of its adequacy is not whether national policy will adopt it, but whether it is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot make the interests of the president of the United States, with all his or her mixed motives and pragmatic or nationalistic calculations, into the judge of the adequacy of Christian witness. To do so is to fall into the error of Constantinianism, making Christian ethics into a chaplain for Christendom. In our post-Christendom context, Christian
ethics is for witness by churches as alternative communities. Jesus Christ is Lord, and the president is not Lord.

As Mark Thiessen Nation documents in the fifth chapter of his *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, Yoder goes to great lengths to redefine responsibility so it does not mean playing by Constantinian rules of acquiescence to the power structure. And as Yoder has shown throughout his writings and certainly demonstrates in *The War of the Lamb*, he strongly believes Christians are called to speak to the world on questions of effective practices for peace and justice.

2) Yoder has a realistic view of national policies and sinful churches. He argues in *The War of the Lamb* that churches and nations have usually acted neither on the basis of nonviolence nor even of just war theory, but on the basis of nationalism, right of state, or crusade.

3) The norm for Christian pacifism is not an absolute rule, or an absolute principle—not even nonviolence—but the Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ does not proclaim an absolute rule, but kingdom breakthroughs, hope in the Holy Spirit, and hope that churches can sometimes respond to the gospel. Ernst Troeltsch and most ethicists influenced by him, including Niebuhr, claim that churches of the sect type depend on norms that take the form of absolute legalism. By “the sect type,” they mean to include Christian pacifists and other Christian congregations that see themselves as alternative communities—alternatives to the secular society—and they see sectarians as basing their ethics on absolute rules. Therefore, since the society will not accept absolute norms, these witness groups must either withdraw from responsible engagement in society or try to force their norms on society by authoritarian takeover. So Niebuhr writes of “religious absolutism as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.” This is a nineteenth-century idealist interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount that I have worked to correct, showing the Sermon on the Mount gives us norms that are not legalistic prohibitions but grace-based practices, kingdom breakthroughs, transforming initiatives. For Yoder, the norm is not a legalistic absolute, but Jesus Christ as Lord. This then requires thick exegesis of the way of Jesus Christ, as Yoder famously has done in *The Politics of Jesus*. And it requires a hermeneutic for what witness to Jesus as Lord means in societies such as ours. Jesus was no apolitical idealist. The Jesus of the gospel story “is not simply different from the Jesus of the liberal optimism that Niebuhr attacked,” writes Yoder. “He is also different from Niebuhr’s ethic of responsibility, by being a much more consciously political figure, in his statements, public action, and formal teaching, than Niebuhr was willing to admit. Therefore the Jesus of this story represents an option Niebuhr did not have on his scale.”

4) Yoder consistently calls for a Christian witness to the state, as his book by that title indicates. There he writes, “Our purpose is to analyze whether it is truly the case that a Christian pacifist position rooted not in pragmatic...
but in christological considerations is thereby irrelevant to the social order.\textsuperscript{16}

We do not expect the state to follow a legalistic or perfectionistic absolute, or to understand and submit to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He names political leaders who have been faithful, including my own father—for which I am grateful.\textsuperscript{17} He rejects the label \textit{sectarian} for his own method,\textsuperscript{18} and instead intentionally advocates a method in which a Christian pacifist does not seek to control history, but does advocate peacemaking practices that are effective in reducing the society’s and the government’s violence. Thus, here in \textit{The War of the Lamb}, he offers one section on pacifism, a second section on just war, and a final section on peacemaking practices that are proving effective. This means churches are not faced with the absolute either/or that either the government will become nonviolent or we have nothing to say to them. We can develop an ethic that prods politicians to be less violent and to engage in justice-making and peacemaking initiatives that are effective in decreasing war and violence. This is what Yoder does in the third section of this book. He is not susceptible to Niebuhr’s claim that pacifists are perfectionistic absolutists who have nothing to say to the “real” world.

For a strikingly fair and accurate description of Niebuhr’s arguments and contributions, and for more extensive refutation, I recommend Yoder’s newly published book, \textit{Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution}.\textsuperscript{19} It also includes a fuller history of nonviolence in many church traditions and of the theory of “justifiable war,” as well as assessments of ecumenical discussions of these questions. It outlines as well liberation theology and arguments about effectiveness of nonviolence versus war and revolution.

Arguing for a Public Ethic—At Home in Churches, and Abroad in Society

In his plans for this book, Yoder wrote that the title intentionally points to the Quaker understanding, symbolized by William Penn as governor of Pennsylvania and Roger Williams as governor of Rhode Island, that nonviolence does not require us to withdraw from having and carrying out an effective public ethic in pluralistic society. Nor is it based on weakness. It is based on the triumph of the Crucified. “Thus the stereotypical vision, that a Christian commitment governed by such more critical and more promising visions drawn from the experience and the witness of the Christian community can properly be categorized as ‘apolitical’ or ‘unrealistic’ (as was done in the heritage of Ernst Troeltsch by the brothers Niebuhr) misreads the facts.”\textsuperscript{20} Gandhi’s concern for effectiveness and Gene Sharp’s massive study of the effectiveness of nonviolent action “break apart Niebuhr’s dichotomy. They argue for the effectiveness of nonviolence.”\textsuperscript{21} Here Yoder’s emphases on the dynamic providence of God, the resurrection triumph of the crucified Jesus, and the effectiveness of nonviolence guide us in making a public witness.
“The Science of Conflict” (chapter 10 below) argues that we need to incorporate research by political scientists like Robert Johansen on new theories in international relations and on a nonviolent world police force, and research in anthropology, sociology, and psychology on aggression and conflict resolution. Christians should not withdraw from or ignore such research, but trust there is truth here and incorporate it into our thinking, our theories, and our theological ethics.

When John Howard Yoder and I were planning our book, Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture, I wanted to conclude by offering our own revised typology of relations between Christ and culture. I wanted to enable readers to visualize how we would correct H. R. Niebuhr’s typology with a better typology. But John was so genuinely troubled by how Niebuhr’s typology was being used to convince Mennonite students to desert their own tradition and its pacifism that he refused to include even an alternative typology. When I then began to urge, “Let’s not cop out, . . .” John immediately flushed bright red. I had never seen the always logical John Howard Yoder show such intense emotion. I knew immediately what he was thinking of—the Niebuhrian stereotype of Mennonites as “copping out” from responsible engagement in the social struggle. I rushed to explain that I meant we should at least provide a typology of ways churches evade the way of Jesus. We should not cop out from identifying the temptations to unfaithfulness. John immediately accepted this—and the red subsided. The result is the concluding chapter of Authentic Transformation, with its typology of ways of evasion. When the book was finished, John said to me and coauthor Dianne Yeager, “I am so glad we set Glen free to write the concluding chapter.”

As this incident shows, Yoder deeply opposed being understood as advocating an ethic of withdrawal. He was deeply committed to developing an ethic loyal to the lordship of Christ over all of life, and not only over private life or only over churches. His themes of the lordship of Christ, the normativity of the way of Jesus for all Christians and not only Christians in peace churches, and his books The Christian Witness to the State, The Politics of Jesus, Priestly Kingdom, Body Politics, For the Nations, and now The War of the Lamb, all point to a witness in pluralistic society that includes a public ethic expressed in thin, secular language as well as in thick, Christian discipleship language. It resembles Michael Walzer’s argument that our ethic is grounded in thick, particular communities and that it is also expressed in thin understandings that are widely shared in pluralistic societies.

Yoder mentions this public ethic in at least these six different books; it is no minor theme, despite its being overlooked by some interpreters. We need to be able to speak the languages of the pluralistic society in order to become articulate about which languages are useful for communicating our witness, which first need to be transformed, and which must be flatly rejected. We need to understand and assess society’s languages in order to develop antibodies
against being manipulated into supporting unjust ideologies of the powers and authorities.\textsuperscript{24} Yoder hated to be seen as offering a particular Anabaptist witness that mainstream church traditions could pat on the head—and therefore marginalize—because it was misinterpreted as lacking a public ethic. He wrote about the lordship of Christ for all Christians in all of life, and for all persons and powers and authorities in all of life. In this he resembled Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In his first two books, written in German and now translated as \textit{Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland}, Yoder argues that the Anabaptists did not withdraw. They engaged in some thirty public debates and discussions with the Zwinglian and Calvinist reformers, and they wanted to continue the dialogue.\textsuperscript{25} It was the magisterial reformers who withdrew from the debates. It was the magisterial reformers who resorted to the power of the state to force the Anabaptists out of the discussion and out of participation in society. Yoder’s whole life was a resumption of that discussion, a participation in scholarly debates, and a defense of young Mennonites and others from being pushed out of participation by the dominant, Ivy League, mainstream discussants. \textit{The War of the Lamb} now develops his public ethic on peace and war beyond what is generally known.

Churches can witness publicly by modeling innovation, by their own faithful practices inside church communities. Churches have taken action in founding orphanages, hospitals, universities, and in practicing agricultural missions and other forms of service. The states have noticed this. Church practices have stimulated innovations in state policies. This is one form of public witness.

As Mark Thiessen Nation has written of Yoder’s “messianic community”:\textsuperscript{26}

Moreover, our life together is comprised of “a covenanting group of men and women who instruct one another, forgive one another, bear one another’s burdens, and reinforce one another’s witness.”\textsuperscript{27} This community provides mutual support. But more than that, “the existence of a human community dedicated in common to a new and publicly scandalous enemy-loving way of life is itself a new social datum.”\textsuperscript{28} In fact, claims Yoder, this “alternative community discharges a modeling mission. The church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately.”\textsuperscript{29} Thus, it is important to realize that the church exists as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is also important to note that this community exists to give its “life for a society.”\textsuperscript{30} And as this community gives its life for the world around us, we still must attend to the identity of this community because “only a continuing community dedicated to a deviant value system can change the world.”\textsuperscript{31}

Churches also witness publicly by \textit{translating multilingually}: that is, making selective and tactical use of normative language in the society. This is what Michael Walzer calls “thin shared understandings,” including those parts of the
government’s claims that point partway toward gospel norms. “The Christian can speak to the statesmen,” Yoder claims, “without failing to take account of their differing presuppositions, using pagan or secular terminology to clothe social critique without ascribing to those secular concepts any metaphysical value outside of Christ.”32 We should learn to speak the language of the society in which we live, adopting a multilingual method.33 “Every secular hope is true and necessary as a criticism of ingrown and complacent ‘religion,’” Yoder writes. “Secular hopes are necessary because secular language is the only language there is. If we do not say ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ in language that men can understand, then we are not saying it at all.” In other words, the problem is not translation; it is whether the translation “is big enough and true enough to say everything that the name Jesus Christ must mean.”34 We must assess translation languages by the norm of the way of Jesus, affirming what is helpful and correcting or criticizing what is not.35

Churches can advocate the societal implications of Christian normative practices, such as racial inclusion, conflict resolution, feeding the hungry, and democratic decision making.36 We may make tactical alliances with secular assumptions such as relativism, liberation, Gandhi, or the Enlightenment.

We may be tactical allies of the pluralist/relativist deconstruction of deceptive orthodox claims to logically coercive certainty, without making of relativism itself a new monism. We will share tactical use of liberation language to dismantle the alliance of church with privilege, without letting the promises made by some in the name of revolution become a new opiate. . . . We shall not grant, with Tolstoy and Reinhold Niebuhr, that to renounce violence is to renounce power. We may then find tactical alliances with the Enlightenment, as did Quakers and Baptists in the century after their expulsion from the Puritan colonies, or with the Gandhian vision, as did Martin Luther King, Jr.37

In For the Nations, Yoder criticizes communitarians for focusing exclusively on the strategy of modeling internally, and he criticizes liberals for focusing exclusively on secular political witness. The communitarians among us “will not risk the challenge of telling the world that servanthood, enemy love, and forgiveness would be a better way to run a university, a town, or a factory. They pull back on the grounds that only they have already experienced the power and novelty of that threefold evangelical cord in the worship and ministry of the church. They affirm integrity but at the cost of witness.” On the other hand, what Yoder calls the “public Catholics” and liberals among us “are concerned not to look foolish to their sophisticated neighbors by making any claims or promises linked to the particularity of the Jew Jesus (or of their own denominational past). By dropping the particular baggage of normative servanthood, enemy love, and forgiveness, they think they might make it easy . . . to talk their neighbors’ language, but they do so at the cost of having nothing to say that the neighbors do not already know.”38
We need a third way. It can be found in a free church community that wit-
nesses to the lordship of Christ over all of life—in the community and in the 
world. “Only a believing community with a ‘thick’ particular identity has 
something to say to whatever ‘public’ is ‘out there’ to address,” Yoder writes. 
“And . . . only the community that welcomes the challenge of public witness 
can justify . . . its distinctive witness.”39

Yoder further articulates this third way in the following quotations: “Over 
against the sanctification of the existing structures of society and the glorifi-
cation of Christian individualism . . . we affirm with the New Testament and 
with the free church tradition through the ages that the church as a new kind 
of social structure, a new kind of human community, is a third option.”40 
“The entire Christian community is sent into the world to ‘communicate a 
message and gather its hearers into communities.’ . . . What we do about so-
cial justice or about education should then be no less ‘missionary’ than what 
we do about crossing linguistic or political borders and communicating our 
convictions to unbelievers.”41

Experiencing Overpowering Grace

In chapter 7 of this volume, Yoder writes:

Hugh Barbour’s exposition of the subjective religious experience of radical 
Puritanism in England, under the heading “The Terror and Power of the Light,” 
interprets profoundly the rootage of the renunciation of violence in the inner 
experience of overpowering grace. What the Anabaptists of the sixteenth cen-
tury 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. Probably this com-
monality is more important subjectively for the peace churches’ peace witness 
than any of the more standard ethical issues I was reviewing before.

Here we see Yoder’s own personal resonance with the inner experience 
of overpowering grace. This comes from a lecture at Swarthmore College 
in 1995, near the climax of his life, before a highly academic audience. He 
had been reviewing and analyzing the ethical argument of the U.S. Catholic 
bishops’ Challenge of Peace. But he was dissatisfied with a purely ethical 
analysis because it overlooked a deeper faith dimension that was important 
for him and for the religious experience of the historical peace churches—the 
experience of God’s grace that underlies the peace churches’ peace witness. 
The experiential dimension and spiritual commitment crucial for peace church 
traditions cannot be reduced to ethical argument.
Yoder was so gifted in analyzing ethical arguments, and so firm in criticizing dualists who reduce spirituality to inner life without public mission, that some have missed his witness to a piety of suffering love, following Jesus Christ as Lord, as revealer of God’s way out of vicious cycles of retaliation, and as promise of eschatological hope. I want to offer my own testimony that while editing chapter 3 on hope, re-reading it carefully, I was hit by a deeper unifying vision of John’s own spiritual insight that even I, engrossed in his theological-ethical vision as I am, had not quite fully seen—even though I knew all the parts. Different dimensions of his unifying vision came together in one illuminating flash, beginning in how he shows Tolstoy’s conversion and climaxing in King’s cosmic hope. I urge you to ponder that chapter very sensitively. Much of the heart of Yoder’s own faith and vision are here.

Twice in The War of the Lamb Yoder emphasizes that Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King’s stances were deeply grounded in their faith in God who rules the cosmos, God who is much bigger than a particular ethical law. He is saying that Tolstoy, Gandhi, King, and the Puritans, Anabaptists, and Pentecostals, as well as ordinary farmers, have an experiential faith in God as Lord of the universe. For Yoder, it is faith in God, and in who God is, as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is Christological, eschatological, and ecclesiological. It is holistic.

But I was thinking too generally of the cosmic vision as faith in God’s sovereignty. Now I see it is the specific revelation in Christ that retaliation and domination are vicious cycles throughout history. And that participation in God’s redemptive suffering and nonviolent confrontations and actions of deliverance, as revealed in Christ, is how God’s sovereignty works in history. Tolstoy saw this in the Sermon on the Mount, and King saw it in God’s love revealed in Jesus. Gandhi caught Tolstoy’s vision to a large extent, and translated much of it into his Hindu context, though without faith in Christ and with a different understanding of God. King experienced a brilliant flash when his African American Baptist loyalty to Jesus’ love combined with Gandhi’s practice of nonviolent direct action and then connected experientially during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Jesus’ way is not passive suffering; it is the way of deliverance, the way of overcoming, when we are down.

In his book Nevertheless and elsewhere, Yoder says that nonviolence is not adequately understood as an absolute ethical rule; it is loyalty not to a law but to Jesus. The pacifism of the messianic community depends “on the confession that Jesus is the Christ and Christ is Lord. It is therefore in the person and work of Jesus, in His teachings and His passion, that this kind of pacifism finds its rootage, and in His resurrection that it finds its enablement. . . . It follows that the character of such a position can be known only in relation to Jesus Christ. . . . Just what it means to believe in Jesus as Christ, just what it means
to follow Jesus Christ as revealer of the nature and will of God, cannot possibly be figured out on our own resources.”

It is not moralism, the stuffy fear of ever making a mistake, nor is it reducible to living by rules; it is participation “in that human experience, that peculiar way of living for God in the world and being used as instruments of the living of God in the world, which the Bible calls *agape* or *cross*.”

When we speak of the pacifism of the messianic *community*, we move the focus of ethical concern from the individual asking himself about right and wrong in his concern for his own integrity, to the human community experiencing in its life a foretaste of God’s kingdom. The pacifistic experience is communal in that it is not a life alone for heroic personalities but for a society. It is communal in that it is lived by a [community] of men and women who instruct one another, forgive one another, bear one another’s burdens, reinforce one another’s witness. . . .

The existence of a human community dedicated in common to a new and publicly scandalous enemy-loving way of life is itself a new social datum. A heroic individual can crystallize a widespread awareness of need or widespread admiration: only a continuing community dedicated to a deviant value system can change the world. . . .

Those who uphold it would affirm that the discipleship of which they speak is a necessary reflection of the true meaning of Jesus and that the call to follow Jesus is a call addressed to all. . . . But the standards by which such a life is guided are not cut to the measure of [people] in general. They can be clearly perceived—to say nothing of being even modestly and partially lived—only through that reorientation of the personality which Jesus and His first followers called repentance. Repentance initiates that true human existence to which all are called. But as long as a given [individual] or a given society has not undergone that change of direction, it is not meaningful to describe how . . . they would live as pacifists. It is thus not possible to extrapolate from this stance of faith a strategy for resolving the urban crisis tomorrow. It is not a position which can be institutionalized to work just as well among those who do not quite understand it or are not sure how much they believe in it. . . .

Another disadvantage of this position is that it does not promise to work. The resurrection is not the end product of a mechanism which runs through its paces wherever there is a crucifixion. There is about the Christian hope in the kingdom that peculiar kind of assurance which is called faith. . . .

“Nevertheless,” Yoder concludes, “this position is closer than the others to the idiom of the Bible and to the core affirmations of the Christian faith.” Here is a core statement, in *Nevertheless*, of Yoder’s own faith.

Yoder’s faith in the lordship of Christ was probably strengthened by his engagement in many PhD seminars with Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann at the University of Basel, since these two theologians emphasized the lordship of Christ over all. Barth drafted the Barmen Confession of those pastors who
resisted Adolf Hitler and resisted relegating Christ’s lordship to a private or only inner-churchly realm. Yoder has influenced Anabaptists and many others to move from a two-kingdom dualism in which Christ is Lord only over an inner realm to emphasizing the lordship of Christ over all of life.

Hence Yoder argues in Preface to Theology that the main point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to make clear that the revelation in Christ is the revelation of who God really is. To claim an ethic based on God as Creator that contradicts the revelation in Christ is to deny the unity of the Trinity. Like his teacher, Karl Barth, and like Claude Welch, he emphasizes God’s unity and guards against those interpretations of the Trinity that he sees moving toward tritheism. The central point throughout Preface to Theology is that God revealed in Christ, and in the Spirit, is really who God is; God is not instead a distant ruler whose ethics differs from Jesus Christ’s ethics.

This helps us understand Yoder’s appreciation of Lisa Cahill’s argument that just war theorists, who are used to reasoning with rules like “never intentionally attack noncombatants,” often interpret pacifism as also a rules-based ethic. Pacifists like Yoder are saying something much deeper. They are committed to the way of Jesus—as revelation of the way and character of God—who is Lord of the universe.

John Yoder himself had a deep experience of the sovereignty of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This is why he flushed bright red with shock to think I was saying pacifism “cops out” from responsible action in the public sphere. If I had meant that, it would have denied his cosmic faith in the sovereignty of God in the whole universe, grounded in God’s revelation of Christ. It would have denied his commitment to serving God faithfully in all of life. It would have accepted a raft of unfriendly stereotypes of Anabaptists as “irresponsible” in a major part of life. It would have attacked their faith in God.

Many in the Anabaptist tradition are affirming a need for greater attention to the experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Such an articulation is implied by and needed for what Yoder here speaks of as the deeply subjective “inner experience of overpowering grace.” He identifies this experience of God’s presence as important for radical Puritans, Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, the early Dunkards, frontier farmer preachers, their Wesleyan contemporaries, and Pentecostals around the world whose experience of God’s presence in the Holy Spirit is also an experience of Jesus Christ as Lord, powerfully present and sovereign. In chapter 10 of For the Nations, he concludes: “The closest the Jesus of the Gospel accounts came to projecting the shape of the church was the description in Matthew (18:15–20) and in John (14–16; 20:19–23) of the Paraclete [Holy Spirit] to empower forgiveness and discernment. That is the warrant for continuing prophetic clarity.” In chapter 11, “The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men,” he refers to the work of the Holy Spirit seventeen times. He focuses on the Holy Spirit’s work for grace-based justice and forgiveness. “The Spirit of God on the other hand enables a justice of grace. We pray
to be forgiven as we forgive others.” Throughout his writings, he emphasizes that congregations need to be organized to practice discernment of the guiding of the Spirit, listening carefully to all members who have a word to share, and seeking clarity together. Additionally, the experience of Jesus Christ as Lord, powerfully present and sovereign, is here in The War of the Lamb. This is an ongoing tradition; our mission is to continue and deepen its development, with special attention to the experience of the Holy Spirit, as witness to what Jesus has taught (John 14:16; 15:16; 16:14; and 1 John 4:1–3).

Honoring Jesus’s Roots in Judaism

In his essay for scholars of Asian religions and elsewhere, Yoder emphasizes Jesus’s roots in Judaism. “Since the Middle Ages Christians are accustomed unquestioningly to considering Christianity as having arisen over against Judaism. We therefore fail to discern the great extent to which the early Christian attitude toward the Roman Empire was simply that of faithful Jews.” The nonviolence of Jewry since Jeremiah depends upon a worldview uniquely tuned to befit the Jewish sociology of dispersion and the synagogue:

The life of every human being is sacred. Blood is the presence of life given by God alone, which only God has the right to take back. Any bloodshed is sacrifice. Long before the rise of Christianity, Jewish saints and sages had gone about the process of mitigating the judicial power to kill, through more careful rules of evidence and warnings against the dangers of bias and self-interest; by rabbinic times the actual execution of capital punishment was practically excluded by their understanding of Torah.

God is sovereign over the cosmos in general, and therefore also over our oppressors no less than over us.

Yoder spells out several corollaries that follow. He bases some arguments on God the Creator, not only God the Son. He emphasizes “the risen Jesus as cosmic Lord, whose ultimate control of events can be trusted, when we cannot govern the world.” “The early Christians were Jews, and . . . Jews since Jeremiah believed that God had abandoned kingship and war as instruments of His concern for justice within history. . . . Jesus’ pacifism was not an innovation; it was an intensification of the nonviolence of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the singer of the Servant passages of the book of Isaiah.”

He suggests six reasons why early Christians not only insisted on their own nonviolence, but also developed an ethic critical of Caesar’s policies and demands. Theirs was not a sectarian, dualistic, two-kingdom ethic in which the lordship of Christ was normative only for their own actions among fellow Christians. Their ethic gave them norms for critically assessing what Caesar
did. It gave them norms for criticizing, transforming, and making use of terms employed in the surrounding society.

Constantinianism actually began two centuries before Constantine, with Justin Martyr’s Neoplatonic split that marginalized Jesus and Jesus’s way. Justin wrote that we must obey Jesus in how we worship, but “in all else we obey you, O Emperor.” Constantinianism was not first of all about there being a Christian emperor, but about Christians weakening, thinning, or giving up any ethic that was critical of the emperor’s policies and demands for loyalty.

“In view of the gospel bases cited above [the five christological bases for radical reformation criticism of Constantinianism cited in chapter two, below, on “Gospel Renewal”], the simplest way to cut to the core of reform is to claim that the teachings of Jesus are to be taken as normative moral guidance. One finds the reasoning as simple as a syllogism: is Jesus authorized to speak for God in matters of morality? If so, then when he teaches, ‘you have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you,’ must not his teachings have at least the same authority as earlier Mosaic and prophetic moral commands? Therefore, the six so-called “minor precepts” of Jesus in Matthew 5 must be no less binding than the Ten Commandments or the two great commandments. Of the six minor precepts, three deal with killing and with love of the enemy. If that is the law of the Lord, then we are called to obey it.”

Letting Just War Theory and Pacifism Be Friends

Yoder argues that just war theory and pacifism should not be seen as enemies but as complementary. They both battle side by side against the usual war ethic, which is either crusade or justification of whatever wars the state decides to wage. Yoder also performs immanent criticism of just war theory, within its own terms, showing how it could be improved.

He comments that “Childress is right.” By this he means that James Childress is right that just war theory, rightly understood, is based on the presumption against violence. Yoder argues this in an essay that he labels “A Think Piece on How Just War Thinking and Pacifism Coinhere.” And he comments: “Take note of other parallel efforts by Duane Friesen in [the] Whitmore Book and by Richard Miller in [his] book; possible paper on the theme of bridging over. Bounce it off Paul Ramsey on ‘come clean.’” Yoder’s main point is that “the just war people who invest all their energy in discussing their relationship to the few pacifists on their left are in political reality tacit allies to the unjust warriors on their right. My purpose here is not to make debating points, but to clarify the substance of a perennial debate by looking at the diverse ways in which language is used to attempt to make sense of the debate but at the same time also (often unintentionally) tends to obfuscate.” And then he prods just war theorists critically, incisively, to take their own principles seri-
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ously and to build the church practices needed to reject war when it is unjust. Anything less is not honest.

Nor does pacifism refuse responsible involvement in political action while just war affirms it. Yoder writes:

Nonviolent action is in any case involvement and not withdrawal. It is a form of involvement to maintain, as all serious nonviolent activist strategies have done, a broad range of forms of pressure within the existing order, at the same time that one seeks to replace it. The work of Martin Luther King Jr. included a very strong affirmation of the use of the American courts and appeal to the American constitution against specific injustices within the American system. Likewise, King’s activity presupposed strong investment in obtaining and using the vote, and in calling the courts to implement the Constitution.

Gandhi had his reasons for trusting less to litigation than King was later to do, but he created his own political party, which ultimately became the governing party, and before that he brought into being (first of all in South Africa) the powerful educational instruments of the Ashram and popular journalism.

Advocating Active Strategies of Peacemaking

Yoder planned the three sections of *The War of the Lamb* in memos dated “4 September 97” and “November 1997.” In his plan for “Section I. Nonviolence: The Case for Life and Love,” he specifically named the two chapters we have included as chapters 1 and 2. At the bottom of his memo, he wrote: “now the question is whether in addition any of the following should belong. . . . Maybe redo the Sermon on the Mount from *The Original Revolution*?” Shortly before he died, he sent me an extensive rethinking of the structure of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in response to what I was writing on that subject. I would love to have seen what sort of “redoing” he would have done. I am impressed with his highly insightful and exegetically accurate interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount in *The Original Revolution*. We wanted to include it even though he did not have a chance to rewrite it, but Herald Press now republishes *The Original Revolution* with a new introduction by Mark Thiessen Nation. Nevertheless, we are struck by his interpretation’s call for personal experience of conversion and *metanoia* in response to the presence of the kingdom:

“No repentance, no kingdom” is what [John the Baptist and Jesus] were calling for was a transformation of the understanding (*metanoia*), a redirected will ready to live in a new kind of world.

The teachings which follow refuse to measure by the standards of “common sense” or “realism” or “reason”: they testify to the novelty of the kingdom that is at hand. Jesus will therefore be describing for us a morality of repentance or
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of conversion, not a prescription of what Every Man can and should do to be happy; not a meditation on how best to guide a society, but a description of how a person behaves whose life has been transformed by meeting Jesus. 59

Yoder also considered including “the Abraham chapter in Original Revolution.” I believe this essay is brilliant and incisive, as well as biblically faithful. It answers the question so many ask: “If Jesus taught all this peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount, what about the Old Testament’s wars and God’s role in them?” But it too is now readily accessible in The Original Revolution, and we want our readers to be enticed to read that book. In fact, we encourage people to read The Original Revolution and this book as a pair. Yoder’s essay on Abraham argues convincingly that we should not read passages in the Hebrew Scriptures for their contrast with the New Testament, but in their own context. Then we see how they differ from what cultures of that day were assuming—not whether wars are right or wrong, but whether our security depends on our military might or on God. The consistent message of the Hebrew Scriptures, over against the surrounding culture, is that our security depends on God’s providence not our might, and on our doing justice and being faithful to God. Again and again, God rescues the people—not because of their expertise in battle but because of God’s faithfulness. The answer is, “God will provide.” The answer is based on faith in and experience of God’s providence.

We also recommend reading the chapter “The Original Revolution” from that book because it answers the question of eschatology, of living in the new era of the kingdom versus living in the old era. Crucial for Yoder’s understanding of peacemaking is God’s bringing the kingdom. He speculated in his plan for this book whether to include “Maybe a section on OT and Eschatology,” but in his last memo, he wrote that the book should be kept significantly shorter than Royal Priesthood so it would sell better. We recommend reading chapters 5–7 of his For the Nations, and “Peace Without Eschatology?” in his Royal Priesthood. 60

His plan for the second section was exactly as we have it, except that he intended to include his lecture at the American Academy of Religion in January 1997, “The ‘Power’ of ‘Nonviolence.’” It repeats arguments for the effectiveness of nonviolent action, and against Reinhold Niebuhr’s either/or dichotomy between pure, powerless nonviolence and pragmatic, effective violence, arguments that Yoder already makes in other essays in the book. Its style is detached and academic, spending almost the first half defining terms. For the sake of readability of this book, and in the interest of avoiding repetition, we have decided not to include it.

His plan for the third section was to include chapters 12, 13, and 15 in the present book. In addition, he considered including, in his words, “Something more from South Africa. . . . Something from Warsaw Series 1983 (currently...
lost), Something from the Heck lectures? Look for.” We have found these, and are including chapters 10 and 11, both of which are from the Heck lectures, but were repeated in his South Africa lectures and/or Warsaw lectures. We also included “Politics: Liberating Images of Christ” as chapter 14. Yoder’s theological ethics is thoroughly Christ-centered, and we wanted to make clear that he bases his advocacy of peacemaking practices on God’s revelation in Christ. We also included this chapter because of its incisive clarity about liberation theology, economic justice, and unjust ideologies.

His third section on “Nonviolent Action and Conflict Management” develops a positive theology of peacemaking, or what we have come to call “just peacemaking.” It includes the just peacemaking practices of nonviolent direct action, conflict resolution, democracy and justice, support for the United Nations, international cooperation, and participation in alternative communities. Just peacemaking works to fill out what Yoder argues for in chapter 6 below under last resort, just intention, truthfully informed populace (which is required for supporting voluntary associations), diplomacy, and nonviolent action, and what he argues for in his third section, especially in shifting from interpretations of nonviolence and the Sermon on the Mount as passivity to transforming initiatives:

1) Yoder argues that we should speak not simply of nonresistance or nonviolence, but of nonviolent direct action. “Nonviolence means active strategies: So what is normally meant as an alternative is specific undertakings, initiatives, strategies, procedures, nonviolent action and not simply nonviolence as a negative, abstract term. . . . Think of all the trouble we would have in developing a Christian understanding of marriage if the only word we had for it were non-adultery and we had to make our affirmations in the form of negations.” Therefore, Yoder defines nonviolent action as “involvement and not withdrawal. It is a form of involvement to maintain, as all serious nonviolent activist strategies have done, a broad range of forms of pressure within the existing order, at the same time that one seeks to replace it.” He defines nonviolence not simply as a deontological obligation of faithfulness, but as a teleological action designed for the purpose of allowing peacemaking initiatives to work: “I propose to use [nonviolence] here . . . as designating modes of activism that renounce violence, in order that other kinds of power (truth, consent, conscience) may work.”

2) Similarly, he writes extensively on conflict resolution. Both nonviolent direct action and conflict resolution go beyond the debate between just war theory and pacifism to develop a proactive peacemaking ethic. Both are practices not only for Christians, but are normative for public ethics. Both call for peacemaking practices and initiatives by non-Christians as well as Christians in the secular world.

3) His positive peacemaking ethic also emphasizes practices of justice. He praises the development of religious liberty, egalitarian democracy, anti-
authoritarian education, the humanizing of corrections, and raising the status of women, slaves, and original Americans. “These specimens of critical social impact may be thought of as second-order nonviolence. . . . They reflect patterns of loving community in the wider society, which are first meaningful within the faith community.” They are expressions of normative New Testament practices in public ethics—as expressions of the normativeness of Jesus’s lordship in society.62

4) He advocates United Nations peace brigades, and commends Robert Johansen’s work in international peacemaking.

All these are practices of the new paradigm of just peacemaking. John and I were dialoguing in my home about just peacemaking theory as it was developing. He urged that the new paradigm of just peacemaking clearly state that it does not replace the paradigms of pacifism and just war theory, but that it adds a crucial dimension: peacemaking action. I was clear on that, and John expressed his support for the project. It enables pacifists as well as just war theorists to advocate a much-needed public ethic, with practice norms rather than legalistic absolutes, and therefore not to be marginalized as in Niebuhr’s stereotype without a relevant word to say to the state. That is what John was working to develop in his third section of The War of the Lamb.

This third section shows nonviolence is not passive but active, not withdrawn or sectarian but engaged in the world and communicating with social science studies. Indeed, the theme of the whole book as Yoder planned it is engagement, interaction, dialogue. John Howard Yoder was no monolinguist: he spoke English, French (every day with his wife, Annie), German (he wrote his first two books in German, now translated by my son), Spanish (in order to lecture in Argentina), and he learned to read Dutch in order to translate Berkhof’s Christ and the Powers, thereby influencing us to make “the powers” a significant category in our ethics. He also advocated a multilingual method in Christian ethics.63 That included learning from and dialoguing with social science, anthropology, just war ethics, Catholics, Protestants, experts in diverse religions, and humanists. This theme of multilingual dialogue runs throughout The War of the Lamb—by intention.