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Binding and loosing, baptism, eucharist, multiplicity of gifts, and open meeting; these five New Testament practices were central in the life of the early Christian community. Some of them are still echoed in the practice of the church today. But the full social, ethical, and communal meaning of the original practices has often been covered by centuries of ritual and interpretation.

John Howard Yoder, in his inimitably direct and discerning style, uncovers the original meaning of the five practices and shows why the recovery of these practices is so important for the social, economic, and political witness of the church today.

Body Politics Details

Date : Published November 6th 2012 by Herald Press (first published June 1st 1989)

ISBN :

Author : John Howard Yoder

Format : Kindle Edition 88 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Church, Nonfiction, Christian

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From Reader Review Body Politics for online ebook

Dean Holbrough says

Great book.

Ideas tumble from every page. Not dated in any way.

Inspired me to practice more of the faith I hold.

Loved his "third way" of looking at interpreting the bible.

Trevor Thompson says

"The Christian community, like any community help together by commitment to important values, is a political reality" (viii).

"To be human is to have differences; to be human wholesomely is to process those differences, not by building up conflicting power claims but by reconciling dialogue" (8).

"What the New Testament is talking about wherever the theme is "breaking bread" is that people actually were sharing with one another their ordinary day-to-day material sustenance. It is not enough to say merely that in an act of "institution" or symbol-making, independent of ordinary meanings, God or the church would have said, 'Let us say that 'bread' stands for daily sustenance.' It is not merely that, as any historian of culture or anthropologist will tell us, in many settings eating together 'stands for' values of hospitality and community-formation, said values being distinguishable from the signs that refer to them. It is that bread is daily sustenance. Bread eaten together is economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family. When in most of his post-resurrection appearances Jesus took up again his wonted role of the family head distributing bread (and fish) around his table, he projected into the post-Passion world the common table of the pre-Passion wandering band, whose members had left their prior economic bases to join his movement...That basis needs are met is a mark of the messianic age" (20-21).

"Thus the primary narrative meaning of baptism is the new society it creates, by inducting all kinds of people into the same people. The church is (according to the apostolic witness - not in much of its later history) that new society; it is therefore also the model for the world's moving in the same direction...After the fifth century there were no more outsiders to convert because the whole world had been declared Christian by imperial edict. That made baptism a celebration of birth, reinforcing in-group identity rather than transcending it" (32).

"The Paul of Ephesians uses the term 'the fullness of Christ' to describe a new mode of group relationships, in which every member of a body has a distinctly identifiable, divinely validated and empowered role" (47).

"The eldership, in the early church as in the synagogue, seems to have been plural, shared with a team of colleagues, a role for which one is not qualified without long and successful experience in family life. Thus the ultimate impact of Paul's use of body image is clearly and consistently antihierarchical" (54).

"Because God the Spirit speaks in the meeting, conversation is the setting for truth-finding. That is true in the local assembly and in wider assemblies, in the faith community and in wider groups" (70).

"In that basic 'lay' sense of a human action in which God is active, all of these five practices - fraternal admonition, the open meeting, and the diversification of gifts, no less than the other practices of baptism and Eucharist - are worship, are ministry, are doxology (praise), are celebratory, and are mandatory. They are actions of God, in and with, through and under what men and women do. Where they are happening, the people of God is real in the world" (73).

Evan Spencer says

Accessible, relevant and challenging. Good read for anyone musing ecclesiology and it's formation of communities of faith.

Maureen says

everyone needs a little yoder in their life.

Brian Hohmeier says

Body Politics reads as little more than an unapologetic and sometimes tactless apology of anabaptistic practical theology. Yoder here displays a cursory and distinct lack of sympathy when it comes to the practices of Reformed and 'high' sacramental churches. This itself would be understandable if it did not shortchange Yoder on his own thesis--that the defining practices of Gospel community (binding and loosing, table-sharing, baptism, egalitarian ministry, and open meetings) are culturally and politically transformative. E.g., that the import and etiology of the eucharist is in its economic implications, as Yoder argues naturalistically, neither thereby precludes the role of theological signification in its meaning nor negates the significance of a sacramental 'real presence.' More to the point, what Yoder neglects to seize upon is that the Christian community's calling upon the memory of Jesus' past and eschatological table fellowship and its speculation of a 'real presence' in *one particular* shared meal can actually be viewed to bolster the witness it gives to a world that segregates and de-sacralizes its tables. Yoder's lack of ecumenical tact, therefore, is not a failure in itself but insofar as he misses the opportunity to imagine with, e.g., Catholics to *expand* the meaning and significance of their practice of a sacramental Eucharist by recalling in its 'real presence' the radical practice of table-sharing it capitalizes upon. In the end, Yoder's low tolerance for non-baptistic thought results a far less sophisticated account of Christian counter-cultural practice than could have been written here, an account whose lack of sophistication is hardly worth reading among a library of alternatives.

Josh Gaudreau says

Short enough to read on two plane rides, but deep enough that I'll be thinking about it and going back to it for a while.

James Klagge says

While this was not quite as good as Yoder's "Politics of Jesus", it was close--and that's saying a lot. In this short book he looks at 5 practices of Christian life that are or should be sacraments: dealing with wrong-doing, communion, baptism, discerning of gifts, and the conduct of meetings. He finds the ways in which all of these are/can be distinctive expressions of Christian redemptive life that also have something valuable to show the non-Christian world. Calling them all sacraments might seem to raise some of them higher than they deserve, but his point is that their importance and distinctiveness are not sufficiently appreciated, and that sacraments are not supposed to be suffused with anything spooky. The book is full of subtle insights, but the best discussion was of the distribution and discerning of gifts. At the end of that chapter he talks about the issue of ordaining women, which was more of a hot topic when he was writing this. But if you read "gay people" in the place of "women" it will hit just as hard in a contemporary context (p. 60):

"The mistake that dominates this debate...is not in the answers, but in the question. There is not (i.e., there should not be) one 'ministerial' role, of which then we could argue about whether it is gender specific. There are as many ministerial roles as there are members of the body of Christ, and that means that more than half of them are women. The roles least justified by the witness of the New Testament--quite regardless of the gender debate--are those of priest and (super-congregational) bishop, precisely the ones that some men have traditionally held alone and want to keep for themselves. To let a few women into an office that men have for generations wrongly restricted, and that did not even exist in the apostolic churches may be a good kind of 'affirmative action,' but it is hardly the most profound vision of renewal....The transformation that Paul's vision calls for would not be to let a few more especially gifted women share with a few men the rare roles of domination; it would be to reorient the notion of ministry so that there would be no one ungifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated. Only that would live up to Paul's call to 'lead a life worthy of our calling'."

Now that's a church I want to belong to and that I want the world to know about. Don't you?

Sean says

This is a book I keep coming back to. In it Yoder lays out 5 practices that are laid out for the church in Scripture. These 5 practices are necessary for the church, because, when properly done, they help members to live together in the peace of Christ. It is a very Anabaptist look at sacraments, with very little room for mystery. But Yoder does a great job of showing the functional benefit of 5 Christian practices.

Sean Watkins says

Body Politics is a good book, reflecting many New Testament principles of community and the church that are lacking significantly in the West.

My major critique of the book lies not in its argument, but with its writer. Yoder wrote this book based on theology and ethics, but his character compromises its integrity.

Kate Davis says

Apparently, I'm pretty Anabaptist in my theologies. Great, broad understanding of Eucharist here. Only problematic part for me was reading his emphasis on hearing every voice (Chapter 5) while being aware of his proprietorial sexual behavior; he doesn't make room for the voices of his victims.

April Vinding says

Not particularly good reading, but the title was irresistible. Interesting to consider the practices of the church as something the world watches. (Duh. But I guess I easily forget.)

David says

In this very short book (80 pages!), Yoder looks at five practices of the Christian community. First is binding and loosing, or, in other words, reconciliation (and moral discernment). Second is breaking bread together, simply eating together in a fellowship open to all people. In most churches this is today the Eucharist or communion. Third is a discussion of baptism, the radical idea that one new humanity has been created out of disparate people (such as Jew and Gentile in the first century). Fourth is that the fullness of Christ is given to all believers, therefore all are gifted to serve. Christian ministry is not just for a separated priestly class. Fifth, and going along with the fourth, is the idea of open meeting. When Christians gather together, as Paul told the Corinthians, all have something to say or offer. Throughout, all focus on a community of diverse people living together in equality in the world as an example for the outer world. A good read.

Sandy says

Most of it didn't really click with me. I thought the section on binding and loosing was interesting.

Ian Guy says

How a proper living of five Christian practices are vital to the health of the church : binding & loosing; Lords Supper; Baptism; shared gifts & ministry: meetings for worship.

Helge Seekamp says

Die Deutsche Übersetzung von 2011, Neufeld Verlag, Die Politik des Leibes Christi. Als Gemeinde zeichenhaft leben.

Mein zweites Buch von Yoder. Ich bin weiterhin voll begeistert. Ein weiteres Mussbuch. Er beschreibt 5 "Praktiken", die er Sakramente nennt (2 davon Abendmahl und Taufe).

"Alle fünf der von uns betrachteten Handlungsweisen können als soziale Prozesse beschrieben werden und sie lassen sich in nicht-religiöse Begriffe übersetzen. Die Vielfalt der Gaben ist ein Modell zur Ermächtigung der Niedrigen, zur Abschaffung hierarchischer Strukturen im sozialen Prozess. Geitegeleiteter Dialog ist das Fundament der demokratischen Idee. Die Empfehlung zum Binden und Lösen ist Grundlage von Konfliktlösung und Bewusstseinsbildung. Die Taufe veranschaulicht interethnische Akzeptanz, und das Brotbrechen feiert wirtschaftliche Solidarität." S. 128f

Nick Klagge says

Like Yoder's "The Politics of Jesus," this is an excellent book (if much shorter). Through very straightforward discussion of five practices of the Christian community, Yoder manages to gesture toward what strikes me as an ideal vision of Christianity. He draws heavily on scripture for understanding, but, like many of my favorite authors (in any field), he staunchly insists on "making it new"--he sees tradition as an important inspiration but refuses to see even the early apostolic church as a golden age to be emulated wholesale.

The book is already extremely short and extremely clear, so I'm not sure I can add anything useful by way of summary. But I will go through one example to give a flavor of the book.

The Eucharist (communion) is probably the most widely known practice that Yoder discusses. As with the other four practices, Yoder's understanding ascribes to it a strong operational significance in addition to the metaphysical significance that it is traditionally given. The metaphysical significance of the Eucharist is that it is the way in which Christians formally accept the sacrifice of Christ and therefore the grace of God. When I say that the traditional view (what Yoder calls the "sacramentalist" view) does not have operational significance, I mean that it appears largely ancillary that this formal acceptance is expressed through the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. It is so because Christ commanded it to be so; yet Christ could have commanded it to be otherwise. The operational significance, as Yoder describes it, is in the communal sharing of economic goods. The reason that the Eucharist is conducted through the eating of bread and the drinking of wine is that Christ commands us to share with those in need; it is by this action (both in the Eucharistic setting and in the broader world) that Christians accept the sacrifice of Christ and therefore the grace of God. It is significant that the Eucharistic bread and wine are not merely symbolic of economic goods, but are in fact economic goods themselves.

The emphasis on the operational component has several implications. First, and I think most significantly, the practice is transparent and even available to non-Christians. The sharing of economic goods is a way in which Christians can declare the presence of God's kingdom to the world at large. Its significance is largely intelligible, even to people who know nothing of the Bible. It is something that Christians can and should practice with non-Christians, welcoming and inviting them in rather than signaling who is "in" and who is "out." Second, it is a practice that is only intelligible at the community level. While it is possible for an individual to go through the motions of the Eucharist, this ignores the operational significance of sharing, which can be realized only communally. Finally, it is a practice whose significance resides in the entire body of the church, rather than being dispensed hierarchically by specialized individuals.

I think a natural criticism would be to say that Yoder's view takes the "religion" out of these practices--once you draw out the operational significance of these practices so clearly, in a way that is intelligible even to non-believers, what role is left for God, for spirituality? After all, atheistic collectives also can and do share economic goods in common (for example). I think this type of criticism is deeply rooted in the history of

dominant religious institutions in the West, which have tended to depict "the spiritual" as something distinct from everyday life and mediated through selected empowered individuals rather than through community ("corporate") practice. Yoder's view says that God is present when the Eucharist is practiced, not as some mystical external presence but in and through the bodies and actions of those assembled. God is also present when non-Christians share economic goods in common; his presence is just not recognized as such. What separates Christians from non-believers, then, is not preferential access to God's work in the world, but rather, recognition and therefore more systematic and intentional cultivation thereof.

One last thing I wanted to point out is the connection between the five practices that Yoder discusses and the concept of resilience. I have been reading a lot lately on the topic of system resilience, mostly as relating to the economy through the writings of Ashwin Parameswaran at the blog *Macroeconomic Resilience*. Ashwin in turn is heavily influenced by work on ecosystem resilience by Buzz Holling and others. The analytical lens of resilience accepts the inevitability of unexpected shocks, and also accepts that no system or institution can be so perfectly designed as to survive indefinitely in a fixed form. In a real sense, stability is the enemy of resilience, as a system that is actively insulated from shocks over time will lose its ability to recover from shocks, with the result that when a shock occurs that cannot be insulated against, the damage to the system is much greater. The classic application in ecology is forest fire suppression (Holling); the application in economics should be apparent to anyone who has been following the news.

What struck me in reading this book was that, although Yoder never addresses the topic, all five of the practices he discusses would seem to foster the church community's resilience. The practice of binding and loosing (conflict resolution) seeks to allow conflict-based shocks to propagate through the community while they are manageable small, rather than allowing them to escalate to unmanageable proportions by bottling them up. The practice of baptism (which expresses openness to outsiders) allows new infusions to the (figurative if not literal) "gene pool" of the community, militating against stagnation. Eucharistic sharing promotes the interests of the community over those of the individual by allowing resources to flow where they are needed. The recognition of the multiplicity of gifts reduces reliance on key individuals, so that the system is more able to cope with inevitable losses. Open meeting discourages groupthink and promotes learning.

Allow me finally to pull in a reference to "Watership Down," which I think is similarly concerned with resilience in the presence of an unalterably precarious and hostile environment. The Christian community as Yoder describes it is much like Hazel's warren--able to cope with the inevitable shocks, without pretending they don't exist ("head in the sand", like Cowslip's warren) and without pretending that they have been mastered once and for all ("end of history", like Efrafa).

Larry says

yoder is a renowned peace-church theologian. i highly recommend his books as a balance to militaristic christianity

Matt Black says

A great practical book for the Anabaptist traditions...

Tim says

The reason I enjoy reading Yoder, even though I don't consider myself a Christian, is that he promotes universal principles. The universals are where I see my "god-image". Love, justice, equality, validation, community...these are all the primary messages in any reading of Yoder. This can apply to the secular world just as much as it does to theology majors. There is no dogmatism in Yoder, no exclusion. His message can be read, appreciated and practiced by anyone because it is not a religious message. There is an element of good that we can all recognize in this interpretation of the Bible (and similar interpretations of all "Holy Books").

John says

Yoder's book articulates some ideas that have been percolating within for some time, but had yet to find any kind of clear expression--certainly nothing approaching the degree of clarity he offers in this surprisingly (based on its brevity) meaty volume. As he notes in his subtitle, Yoder focuses his attention on five practices Christians have had at various times in the church's history, and should have today.

The book approaches Christianity from the ground up, looking at simple commands associated with the person and/or work of Jesus: binding and loosing (fraternal admonition), breaking bread together (economic solidarity), baptism (bringing in a new humanity, diverse in race and gender), the fullness of Christ (all believers are gifted and have a role to play--I would like to see a bit more detailed treatment on the issue of women here), and the rule of Paul (truth sought through conversation).

Running through the book is a portrait of a full-fledged functioning community--people joined together in their following of Jesus, relying on one another, benefiting from one another, caring for one another, and learning from one another. What I most appreciated about Yoder's approach was his insistent refusal to utilize power to gain an advantage by force over other groups or individuals. The portrait here is one of dialogue, conversation, and coming to mutual agreement, rather than of forcing, bullying, or insisting on some predetermined rule or law. There is something profoundly freeing about Yoder's ideas here, one that trusts the Spirit to guide the church into all truth, one that respects the individual dignity of each human being, and one that calls for the church to be a place not where one works out one's personal relationship with Jesus, but where one has, by following Jesus, entered into a community of people designed to effect transformation in one's life.

I can't recommend this highly enough.
