

Body Politics: Baptist practices and ethical formation

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Introduction

I hope in this paper to combine several themes. My over-riding concern is to show how essential practices of Christian and specifically Baptist worship shape and form the social ethics of our communities.

It has been asserted in recent ethical debate, not least in the works of the Methodist ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas, that ethical discourse should concern itself more with issues of virtue and character than with so-called 'quandary situations'.^[1] In the latter the logic is as follows: ethical practice is based upon laws and principles governing our behaviour. Occasionally these laws or principles come into conflict with each other, creating a quandary that must be debated and negotiated to determine right behaviour. As an example, Christians are commanded not to kill but at the same time to defend the defenceless. The obligation to defend must therefore at times over-ride the obligation not to kill. Just war theory sets out the conditions in which such a decision might be made. Ethical discourse concerns itself therefore with boundary situations and with exceptional cases in which an absolute command might be suspended for the sake of an even higher imperative.

By contrast, a virtue-based approach is concerned not with punctiliar decisions that might be made from time to time but with what kind of people do the right kind of thing. The church, in place of the casuistic approach which deals with exceptions and hard cases, should be more concerned with the formation of primary virtues in its members in the assurance that virtuous people will tend to choose right courses of action. From this is derived a chain of thought that goes as follows: *Virtues* (such as honour, compassion, honesty, peaceableness, kindness) proceed from the *character* which is formed within people. Character is formed through the *communities* out of which people come. Communities are shaped and their values reaffirmed by means of the *practices* in which they typically engage. Practices are a product of the *stories* which provide the narrative for the community's self-understanding.

As applied to the Christian church we can see how this might work. The *story* of the Gospel gives rise to a *community* shaped by it which has a variety of *practices* in which it makes the meaning of the story concrete and these in their turn shape the *character* of the church's members leading them to *virtuous* living. For the sake of moral living it can therefore be seen as essential that the church exists as a multiplicity of congregations with distinctive practices shaping the life of its members. This is where we make the connection with Baptist worship. Baptists share a story with the rest of the church, interpreting it according to their own particular inclinations and convictions. Within the catholic church and its common affirmations they are also shaped by insights and experiences belonging to their particular history and tradition. These are made concrete in their distinctive approach to the church's common practices and also in those practices that are not necessarily *universally* recognised in the church but which Baptists take seriously (the church meeting might be an example of this). We should expect then that worshipping Baptist communities might tend to produce people of a distinct kind with certain instincts and inclinations as to moral and ethical practice. This paper explores what these might be.

A methodological choice

I explore these themes by means of a 'reading of recovery'. Much has been written in the history of the church, not least in our own tradition, and much of it has been inadequately heard and appropriated. In 1992 the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1927-97) published a brief but suggestive book (of 88 pages) to which he gave the title *Body Politics: Five practices of the Christian community before the watching world*^[2]. Typically for Yoder, the book is the product of a variety of conferences and lectures in which he had tried out his main themes in debate with others. For that reason, and also typically, it reflects contexts and controversies that may not be immediately obvious to the reader. Yoder was very much a *dialogical* theologian with the consequence that reading him is sometimes like listening to one end of a telephone conversation. Perhaps for this reason he can also at times seem to be ignoring themes and emphases which belong to a more complete exposition or even denying things which he actually intends to complement with points less often made. However, his book offers some insights relevant to the intention of this paper and although they come from a Mennonite, this tradition, and Yoder's own commitments to the wider believers church tradition, mean that there are fruitful insights here.

A basic thesis

As the title suggests, *Body Politics* is about the nature of the church as a political body. Yoder resists the prevalent notion that church and civil community are two separated spheres such that the church must negotiate some kind of transfer from one to the other if it wishes to make an impact upon the political realm. Instead, the church is *essentially* and *already within itself* a political community and as such influences the wider political realm by simply being what it is.

This idea is opposed to both 'liberal' and 'pietist' approaches to the issue. As seen by Yoder, the liberal approach derives from the life of the worship life of the church a variety of *insights* concerning human nature and the world which it then carries over into the wider community. The pietist approach focuses on a new set of *insides* which leads them to life-changing behaviour. This slightly strained use of language enables Yoder to state his point:

The Christian community, like any community held together by commitment to important values, *is* a political reality. That is, the church has the character of a *polis* (the Greek word from which we get the adjective *political*), namely, a structured social body. It has its ways of making decisions, defining membership and carrying out common tasks. That makes the Christian community a political entity in the simplest meaning of the word.^[3]

Because the church is a political entity in these terms, Yoder goes on to make a further crucial statement:

Stated very formally, the pattern we shall discover is that the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called. Church and world are not two compartments under separate legislation or two institutions with contradictory assignments, but two levels of the pertinence of the same Lordship. *The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.*^[4]

The church, then, precedes the world in expressing in its social and political existence the will of God for all humanity and, indeed, the way that will ultimately prevail in God's purposes. The church should for this reason be examined in regard to the set of relationships which functions within it, in particular as these are expressed in its practices. To develop his thesis Yoder selects five of these practices and examines them for their political significance for the church on the one hand and their political potential for the wider community on the other. The practices he chooses are: 'binding and loosing' (by which he means the life of dialogue and mutual correction within the church as a way of resolving differences), the Lord's Supper, baptism, ministry and 'the rule of Christ' (by which he means what many Baptists would call 'the church meeting').

Practices and sacraments

Before examining these in order, a word concerning Yoder's understanding of the term 'sacrament' is appropriate. Historically, Baptists have had some caution about the use of this word mainly because as used in the majority traditions it has been understood to mean that the very action of a sacrament, of baptism or eucharist for instance, has power to effect what is symbolised by it. So baptism, as an example, has the power to effect regeneration *ex opere operato*, by virtue of the act itself irrespective of the faith of the recipient. Baptists have decisively rejected such a view and have insisted, as with the Reformed tradition in general, that without faith such actions are rendered inoperative. The word 'ordinance' has often been preferred as a way of recognising the 'ordaining' of certain practices in the teaching of the Lord. In its turn this has risked suggesting that the ordinances are not powerful moments but mere signs and testimonies of something that happens apart from them: baptism is a sign, for instance, of grace already received in conversion rather than itself a means of grace. This position is often associated with the name of Zwingli and labelled as 'bare memorialism'. Now it ought to be possible, and in my opinion is so, to chart a course between these two positions so as to affirm the grace-filled, powerful nature of the ordinances/sacraments when received in faith. There have been, and are, Baptist theologians who are keen to affirm the sacraments as instruments of grace in this sense. George Beasley-Murray affirmed baptism, as one sacrament, as an instrument of God. It is a 'trysting-place' or place of rendezvous where God has promised to meet those who draw near in faith.^[5] Yoder appears to be sympathetic to this perspective although doubting whether the word 'sacrament' can be disentangled from its 'sacramentalistic' magical and mechanical misreadings.^[6] Following Augustine, a sacrament is routinely defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. Yoder however bases his understanding on the promise of Jesus that, 'What you bind on earth is bound in heaven' (Matthew 18: 18) and defines a sacrament as a human action in which, 'God would at the same time be acting "in, with and under" that activity'.^[7] So,

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.^[8]

In this Yoder is countering a view of the sacraments that sees them as mysterious and other-worldly in favour of one which finds them taking sociological, political form in the shape of the Christian community and therefore of being 'publicly accessible behaviors, which the neighbors cannot merely notice but in fact share in, understand, and imitate'.^[9] In so doing the neighbours presumably find themselves being drawn into the kind of life God intends for all and which is anticipated in the church.

Enough has been said to set the general framework and attention is now given to the five practices in specific detail.

Binding and Loosing

One is not surprised to find Yoder, a Mennonite theologian, identifying the practice of 'fraternal admonition' as a fundamental practice, indeed sacrament, of the church. Referring to the ways in which church discipline has been used abusively in the church, even in Mennonite churches, he is at pains to cast this practice in the best possible light. Rooted in the teaching of Jesus about the several steps to be taken when a brother or sister sins^[10] Yoder sees the intention of Jesus as having to do with the moral discernment of the Christian community and the practice of the 'dialogue of reconciliation'.^[11] What is envisaged here is not so much church discipline as a conversational process aimed at harmonising the Christian community. The aim is not to punish but to serve the well-being of offenders by reconciling

them to the community. It is the responsibility of the whole church and not of ministers alone and is not, as a reading of some corrupted versions of the Matthew text might suggest, to be exercised only when one is personally sinned against but whenever a sister or brother sins. As a practice it only makes sense when there is a voluntary nature to the community, that is, when members have willingly submitted themselves to its practice.^[12] Without this it does become a form of imposition and coercion. The essence of the practice is reconciling dialogue based on mutual forgiveness which creates equality and trust. This essence has been lost in taking the practice out of the community as a whole and vesting it in priests and clergy as a specialist task of confession and reconciliation.

We have here a fundamental anthropological insight into the relationship of conflict and solidarity. To be human is to have differences; to be human wholesomely is to process these differences, not by building up conflicting power claims but by reconciling dialogue.^[13]

What counts as a human action which is also pregnant with divine action within the church also illustrates Yoder's primary thesis: what is true for the political and social reality of the church has potential for wider human society as a model of living together in social relationships.^[14] Conflicts can be resolved by means of conversation, as is notably the case with conflict resolution practices. Facing conflict with redemptive dialogue is what the gospel brings to light as a genuine possibility not just for the politics of the church but also of the earthly city. It builds community by seeking for truth.

It is tempting at this point to comment extensively but I shall restrict myself to a few remarks. It is a tendency of Yoder to interpret the church and its achievements *in optimum partem*. It is a constant problem that the politics of the church fall far short of what might be reasonably expected from the regenerate community. At the same time it is beyond doubt that Jesus was giving guidance to the community he founded about alternative ways of dealing with conflict other than strife issuing ultimately in separation and rejection. Sceptics might feel that Yoder is idealistic, but the thrust of Jesus' teaching as he presents it is challenging: to seek strenuously for reconciliation with those with whom we are at loggerheads. Few of us could claim that there is not further that we could go.

Breaking bread

In expounding the practice of breaking bread together Yoder dismisses with a degree of impatience the extent to which a primal and essentially simple practice of the church has become burdened with theological and ceremonial baggage that renders its proper meaning hard to recover.^[15] These push the practice into the realm of the specially and mysteriously religious when it should be seen clearly as primarily an *economic* reality. Jesus was not instituting a liturgical meal so much as claiming as his memorial the disciples' 'ordinary partaking together of food for the body'.^[16] This is clear to Yoder in the early chapters of Acts where breaking bread together goes hand in hand with generous sharing with each other.^[17] The eucharist is therefore a common meal partaken in a spirit of thanksgiving.^[18] Yoder's intention here is to rescue the eucharist from the set-apart world of religious ceremonial in order to see it in more ordinary terms as an act of economic sharing of rich and poor in the newness of the messianic community. To follow Yoder's sacramental line, when this happens *God* is working in the human acts of sharing. It represents a form of Jubilee.^[19] It leads to feeding the hungry and in this act the 'real presence' of Christ is also to be found.^[20]

At first glance it seems that Yoder may here have been too keen to exclude a liturgical dimension to the eucharist and therefore to be engaged in a form of reductionism, downplaying the dimension of divine encounter. The fact that eucharist has its origin precisely in the Passover, a liturgical meal of Israel, suggests that this is not an either/or situation and that it ought to be possible both to hear his corrective and affirm more traditional approaches. We are now, however, beginning to catch the drift of his thought and the next practice he identifies is the central symbol of baptism.

Baptism

'Baptism introduces or initiates persons into a new people'.^[21] Functionally, therefore 'baptism is about the transcending of inherited nationalities and conditions, as for instance in the merging of Jews and Gentiles in the new humanity of the church. As such, the church anticipates and stimulates the movement of history towards the new society of the kingdom of God.'^[22] Baptism therefore implies egalitarianism and this is a dimension that more individualistic approaches to baptism might overlook. Yoder's views here reflect the crucial statement in Galatians 3: 28: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.

This trans-ethnic unity essential to the church once more sets the tone for the wider community. It is not, despite the founding documents of the USA, 'self-evident' that all people are created equally. Creation itself might be held to suggest that people are divided into inequality by tribes, tongues and nations. By contrast, Paul's understanding of *redemption* is what leads to a message about equalisation between people.^[23] At this point Christian egalitarianism might be distinguished from its parallel in Enlightenment ideology. Equality is founded upon our universal indebtedness to God's saving work in Christ. It is here that we come together and baptism is the sign of this inclusion. Incidentally, we identify here a basis for religious liberty since baptism 'is the person's free choice to join a movement in response to having heard a message that invites him or her to become a member'.^[24]

At this point, with two more practices to examine, we pause for a moment to take stock. Yoder's point is that the church's practices have social meaning. Those we have considered speak of the importance of reconciling dialogue, of economic sharing and of the formation of an inter-ethnic community. As the church embodies functionally these realities, which Yoder does not shirk from calling political, so it acquires transformative potential, the ability to impact the wider community in the direction into which it is already being drawn. Worship is translated into ethical formation and impact.

So we come to two further practices and, some substantial points having been made, perhaps we can summarise them more succinctly.

Ministry

This section is called by Yoder 'the fullness of Christ' but by it he means the practice of Christian ministry. It refers to 'a new mode of group relationships, in which every member of a body has a distinctly identifiable, divinely validated and empowered role'.^[25] Once more Yoder is either opposing or seeking to correct more traditional emphases, in this case upon ministry by a clerical élite rather than the whole people of God.^[26] Whereas there is a 'chronological priority' to the ministry of apostles and prophets and a 'procedural priority' given to the roles of 'elder-moderator' or 'elder-teacher', Yoder finds Paul's metaphor of the body as a way of understanding the giftedness of the church 'consistently anti-hierarchical'.^[27] Indeed, Paul is both counter-intuitive and counter-traditional in the way he develops the metaphor of the body, relativising the idea of 'the professional purveyor of access to the divine' in the direction of common access and ministry. Pentecost puts religious specialists out of work. Jesus was both the last sacrifice and the last priest.^[28]

Once more the practices of the church, rooted in the redeeming work of Christ, have potential for re-envisioning a wider society which breaks free of confining and disabling understandings of group relationships. Yet this particular practice is the one that, according to Yoder, is still to be the subject of a future reformation, the church never having consistently sustained its insights but having persistently lapsed back into the demand for religious specialists. There is no denying that Yoder's burden here is one that needs careful attention. But in my own judgement he neglects the degree to which in the gifting and

enabling of the whole people of God, there are indeed special gifts and ministries which are given to some and not all. Moreover, the achievement of the ministry of all is intimately related to the freedom of the some to exercise their enabling ministries effectively.

So we come to the last practice, which Yoder sometimes calls somewhat confusingly the 'rule of Paul' and at others the 'rule of Christ'. He means what is often also called the Church Meeting.

Church Meeting

There is some overlap in this section with what Yoder has said both about binding and loosing and about the fullness of Christ and it relates to the freedom of all to speak. He calls this 'the rule of Paul' because in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul sets out an order for Christian worship that allows all to speak who believe themselves led of the Spirit to do so. Yoder points out that there is no reference here to a moderator or 'priest' managing the meeting. *All* may speak and *all* must weight what is said. The order set out by Paul has parallels with Acts 15 in which the church deliberates and decides and is extended in the first Christian centuries into an inter-church process of synods and councils.^[29] The process involved in all of this is the search for consensus arising from open conversation. This enables the will of God to be known in the meetings of God's people.^[30]

By way of secular analogy, which we have seen is one of his persistent concerns, Yoder draws attention to the thesis of A.D.Lindsay, that Anglo-Saxon democracy emerged out of the Puritan conviction that the hearers of the Word of God were free under Christ to talk back to its expositors.^[31] In secular terms this involves the willingness to listen to one's adversaries since, as Gandhi saw, the adversary is part of the truth-finding process. It can therefore be argued, with justification, that government of the church by means of the conversational process of church meeting is not the daughter of democracy but its mother.

Conclusions

Yoder's concern has been to demonstrate that the very fabric and essence of the church's life expresses and embodies a new social reality in which God himself is active and at work. The presence of such a political community in the midst of the wider community has secular implications. It works transformatively within the wider community even when, perhaps mostly when, it does not set out to be explicitly political. According to Yoder:

There is .. a kind of mediation, a 'bridging-over', which our five 'practices' illustrate, from the faith community to the other social structures. This kind of 'mediation' is not a mental or verbal operation of translational or conceptual bridging, but rather the concrete historical presence, among their neighbors, of believers who for Jesus' sake do ordinary social things differently. They fraternize trans-ethnically; they share their bread; they forgive one another. These activities are visible; they are not opaque rituals. They lend themselves to being observed, imitated, extrapolated.^[32]

One conclusion from this is that the church should have the courage and integrity to be what it is. In fulfilling its vocation to worship God and living out the reality of this worship in its practices, it does not remove itself from the so-called 'real world'. It embodies the 'real world' as it already experiences the renewal which is held in store for all things. By preceding the world in this way it discovers more power to renew its environment than it might imagine possible.

In details I would at many points wish to qualify Yoder's claims not in order to deny them but to affirm more constructively than he appears to do the positions from which he distinguishes himself. He leaves much unsaid in his theology of baptism. I am left unconvinced that the eucharist is not primarily a

liturgical meal. He overlooks the importance of some kinds of specialisation in the roles of pastor-teacher, evangelist or apostle. But this apart, his thinking adds a dimension to more established approaches that ought not to be missing. Many of his points apply equally to Christian churches of whatever persuasion, but particularly in his comments on baptism and church meeting there are points relevant to our own tradition. By these practices a form of discipleship is developed that shapes the church and forms its members for mission to the world. Out of the worshipping life of the congregation there comes a shaping power. For this reason how we worship and what we practise is a primary not a secondary issue. This leads us to revalue our heritage and to see it is as more than a mere tradition. Rather it has vital significance for the way we live morally as church and the way we make our impact.

^[1] E.g. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London, SCM Press, 1983).

^[2] Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992.

^[3] *Body Politics*, viii.

^[4] *Ibid*, 9 (my emphasis).

^[5] G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1972), 305. See also Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002).

^[6] *Body Politics*, 44, 72.

^[7] *Body Politics*, 1, 6.

^[8] *Body Politics*, 72. It is clear here that Yoder does not go along with the traditional Protestant understanding that there are only two sacraments, baptism and eucharist, in distinction from the Roman Catholic identification of seven such. Given his definition of what makes a sacrament sacramental there is clearly room for a variety of practices, certainly more than five, in which human actions may also be seen as divine actions.

^[9] *Body Politics*, 73.

^[10] Matthew 18: 15

^[11] *Body Politics*, 2.

^[12] *Body Politics*, 5.

^[13] *Body Politics*, 8.

^[14] *Body Politics*, 11.

^[15] *Body Politics*, 14.

^[16] *Body Politics*, 16.

^[17] Acts 4: 32

^[18] *Body Politics*, 19.

^[19] *Body Politics*, 24-5 cp. Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, Luke 4: 16 - 21.

^[20] *Body Politics*, 27.

^[21] *Body Politics*, 28.

^[22] *Body Politics*, 32.

^[23] *Body Politics*, 35.

^[24] *Body Politics*, 43.

^[25] *Body Politics*, 47.

^[26] *Body Politics*, 51.

^[27] *Body Politics*, 54.

^[28] *Body Politics*, 56.

^[29] *Body Politics*, 63.

^[30] *Body Politics*, 67.

^[31] *Ibid* cp. Lindsay, *The Churches and Democracy* (London: Epworth Press, 1934).

^[32] *Body Politics*, 74-5.