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PEACE, POSTMODERNISM, AND PRAXIS:
'Binding and Loosing' as a Model for Conflict Transformation

by Ben Lamb

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Peace, Postmodernism, and Praxis:
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First, let's explore how the postmodern turn strengthens the peace position of the contemporary Mennonite church. With our society's awareness of pluralism and the growing recognition that there is no such thing as a common "public" realm, Mennonite have learned not to be embarrassingly apologetic by the particularity of their peace perspective, nor to let others accuse us as "apolitical" or "irrelevant." Secondly, postmodernism, more than not, values heterogeneous voices and respects counter-cultures. Believers who embrace their convictions of pacifism are being heard and taken seriously in the academia and larger church.¹ Thirdly, theological postmodernism questions the adequacy of doctrine without practice. It is now more common to here emphasis on *orthopraxy* as well as orthodoxy. This ethical turn, or better put, this 'return' to ethics reinforces the Anabaptist focus on peace and war as key issues in ecumenical conflict.

But regardless of whether the academic atmosphere has been favorable to Anabaptist theology or not, Mennonites still faithfully proclaim Jesus Christ as the One who "came preaching peace" (Ephesians 2:17). However, as American culture starts to realize that truth requires embodiment, that truth depends on how we live our lives, Anabaptists could be doubly shamed if when the world looks at us to see how peace can concretely work all they discover is hypocrisy. In other words, how shall we explain the covert forms of violence committed by Mennonites? A popular joke insists no denomination is more passive aggressive than Mennonites—they may publicly let you win, but privately they will possess righteous indignation towards your violent sins!

¹ In this speech, I will focus upon two theologians that have ecumenically gained a wider audience: John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauérwas.

This is why I shall assert that peacemaking must begin at home for Mennonites, not in theoretical debates about tricky scenarios facing governments far away (which there will also be time for). When John Howard Yoder reminded us of the “absolute priority of the church over the state,”² the implication was that Mennonites should first seek unity at home in their local congregations, family homes, and city neighborhoods or rural farms. Peace cannot be confined to discussions, service, and sermons. To the extent that we cannot live together in peace with family and strangers after the classroom debate as well, and after agency close their doors, and after the weekend worship, than our high proclamation lacks truth. Peacemaking must begin at home through conflict transformation in intentional communities, neighborhoods, and congregations engaged in ecumenism.

By 1524 of the radical reformation in Europe, followers of Huldrych Zwingli, eventually known as the Anabaptists, already commonly referred to the “rule of Christ” as the proper method for responding to conflict or sin.³ Scripturally based on Matthew 18:15-20, the “rule of Christ” alludes to a teaching of Jesus that offers a model of reconciliation, directing disciples what to do if a brother or sister errs. The response of peacemaking progresses concentrically: first, one should approach the offender alone; if the person is unwilling to reconcile, then a few more people should help facilitate the process; finally, if the person remains unwilling, the matter of conflict is to be brought before the discerning congregation, opening several possibilities: if the person has sinned, reparations need be made, or if person has not sinned, then the conflict has been settled through communication. Either way, Jesus expositis specific procedures that will lead a community into perpetual intra-examination of its ethical standards. Thus, a

² John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002) p. 17.

³ John Howard Yoder, “Binding and Loosing,” *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998) pp. 323-358. This essay first appeared in the *Concern* pamphlet series, no. 14, 1967.

congregation who takes Jesus' words seriously might have to articulate implicit instruction for the first time, or confirm certain adherence to a norm, or question a traditional practice under suspicion, or even repent of an oppressive communal standard. Matthew 18, the early Anabaptists, and Yoder call this procedure "binding and loosing." It reveals the realism of Jesus, for He well understood the difficulties of life together and daily tensions that can interfere with the peace and unity of all disciples. The messiness of ordinary life does not reduce the holy significance of this ecclesial practice—Yoder lists it as a 'sacrament.'⁴ This text in Matthew is one of only several locations in which Jesus actually uses the word 'church.'

'Binding and loosing' was a central conviction of the early Anabaptists, most notably in the writing of Balthasar Hubmaier who also described it as 'fraternal admonition.' If one member of the body sinned, it was the whole community's responsibility to repent and repair. Conflict reconciliation between Christians incarnates the core Gospel imperative to love one's enemies and pray for them. Integrating this theology of peacemaking into their praxis, the Anabaptists grasped the early church's missional opening of Jews to Gentiles. For Paul, the purpose of history is reconciliation between God and humanity by overcoming any obstacles to bring different people together in unity, such as the Jews and Gentiles, even former haters or persecutors together in love. Emphasizing the inherent inseparability between truth and practice, John Howard Yoder sounds quite postmodern when he writes, "Where Christians are not united, the gospel is not true in that place."⁵ Ironically enough, Balthasar Hubmaier, the main writer on 'binding and loosing,' failed Yoder's postmodern test of praxis. Hubmaier fell short of applying 'the rule of Christ' as an imaginative alternative to the

⁴ 'Sacraments' are social-ethical practices/"marks" for John Howard Yoder, including baptism and the Eucharist. Binding and loosing is one of the five Yoder elaborates upon at length in "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Ibid.* pp. 359-373.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

coercion of the state. Instead he would permit Christians to wield the sword of violence. He lacked enough conviction to join the Anabaptists in solidarity when their persecution increased.⁶

Putting peace to practice will not happen unless we stop suppressing conflict and start undergoing it in a cooperative way with those whom we disagree or who have hurt us. When conflict is ignored, repressed, or dealt with inappropriately, then further miscommunication and divisions happen. Conflict in itself is neither good nor bad, but can be dealt with in a way that creates peace through this process of approaching, listening, and discerning.⁷ Yoder writes, "Conflict is socially useful; it forces us to attend to new data from new perspectives. It is useful in interpersonal process; by processing conflict, one learns skills, awareness, trust, and hope."⁸

In Colorado for a year, I lived in an intentional community dedicated to urban service and church participation. Speaking from personal experience, I can testify that conflict and the resultant peacemaking saved our team from collapsing. Being the only male in the community, I often dissented and felt separated from my three female teammates. However, when conflicts surfaced between them, we plunged into a different pattern of group dynamics that forced us to reflect honestly upon our grudges and converse about our perception of wrong-doing in others and in self. One of the hardest things I have ever done was to make several apologies that I struggled to give as well as my struggling to forgive others for the sake of unity.

6 John Howard Yoder, "Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33 (January 1959) pp. 5-17. I became aware of this article through Mark Thiessen Nation's recently published book, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006) p. 34.

7 My understanding of conflict has been influenced by John Howard Yoder, see especially his "Conflict from the Perspectives of Anabaptist History and Theology," *unpublished lecture*, Mennonite Graduate Fellowship, Ithaca, Dec. 28, 1969, pp. 1-10. I found access to this article from the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. Thanks to Joe Spring, the curator, for his help.

8 John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001) p. 8. Once again, I owe Mark Thiessen Nation credit for reminding me of this quote in his "Toward a Theology for Conflict Transformation: Learning from John Howard Yoder," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80, 1 (January 2006) pp. 43-60.

I learned from my service program how dependent shalom is upon forgiveness. No community or church will be without tensions, conflict is inevitable, and we are all complicit in committing violence against our sisters and brothers. Our only hope therefore is to forgive and be forgiven, and then can we be truthful and nonviolent as Stanley Hauerwas often says.⁹ Furthermore, our ability to forgive others comes from above, empowered by God's grace and Christ's love. Peacemaking is the very character of the One we worship.

However, forgiveness must not be only a psychological transaction; there must be a real process of ritual, reparation, and the creation of hospitable space for discernment. Yoder writes, "Resolution comes about not by accident but by design."¹⁰ 'Binding and loosing' is an intentional process that transforms how we live together, transforming our violence into an eschatological fellowship. Hauerwas helps us to correct the deceptive myth that time heals all—no, forgetfulness or repression does not heal the wounds. Only intentional forgiveness can bring us back to one another in shalom. Hence, when writing on the racialization of society, Hauerwas argues that nothing would be more destructive than to forget our histories and buy into the lie that equality comes from color-blindness and homogenous sameness.¹¹ Conflict must be dealt with directly through forgiveness, rather than just moving on through forgetfulness, Hauerwas writes in his essay entitled, "Peacemaking is Conflict-Making."

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, "Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church," *The Hauerwas Reader*, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). This article is a revised version of an earlier essay (originally appearing in a *Perspectives* journal article) entitled "Peacemaking Is Conflict-Making," which I discovered in the Mennonite Church Archives, Goshen, Indiana: John H. Yoder (1927-1997) Collection, Hist. Miss. 1-48, Box 212, folder entitled "Hauerwas." Thanks to Dennis Stoesz for his help. Interestingly enough, though the article was in Yoder's personal stacks, it indicates Yoder's influence on Hauerwas, rather than the other way around.

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, "Conflict from the Perspectives of Anabaptist History and Theology," p. 3.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History, But Time Has Been and Can Be Redeemed," *A Better Hope* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000) pp. 139-154.

Similarly, in ecumenical arenas, toleration of pluralism is not enough. “Fraternal admonition is the logical prerequisite for engaging in ecumenical dialogue,” writes Michael Cartwright.¹² To overcome the obstacles of denominational divisions, we must refuse to cease talking; Christian unity happens through conversation and practical peacemaking. Yoder encourages us to see ‘binding and loosing’ as more than just good social science skills. Rather, this is the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit helping us discern the will of God for a new day, everyday.¹³

Returning to our postmodern goal of integrating our convictions into our daily communal praxis, Yoder writes, “The only way to see how this will work will be to show how it will work.”¹⁴ The church witnesses to the world by embodying an alternative, nonviolent method of conflict reconciliation. It is this process that we call peace; peace is not a boring, static condition, but the adventurous, cosmic drama and the ultimate purpose of history.

¹² Michael G. Cartwright, “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder’s Vision of the Faithful Church,” *The Royal Priesthood*, pp. 1-49.

¹³ John Howard Yoder, “Conflict from the Perspectives of Anabaptist History and Theology,” p. 4.

¹⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics As Gospel*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) p. 45.