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# The Formative Power of Scripture. The Church as a Hermeneutical Community

*Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen*

## SUMMARY

This article gives a short introduction to the field of theological hermeneutics, and shows that a common feature of many new contributions to this field is that the biblical Scriptures and the Christian Church are closely connected. Against this background, the article introduces the

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel gibt eine kurze Einführung in das Gebiet der theologischen Hermeneutik und zeigt ein Charakteristikum auf, das vielen neueren Beiträge in diesem Bereich gemein ist: Sie weisen auf den engen Zusammenhang zwischen der Heiligen Schrift und der christlichen Gemeinde hin. Auf diesem Hintergrund stellt der Artikel den amerika-

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article constitue une brève introduction à l'herméneutique théologique et montre que de nombreuses contributions nouvelles dans ce domaine ont pour trait commun de faire ressortir le lien étroit entre la Bible et l'Église chrétienne. Avec cet arrière-plan, l'auteur expose la pensée

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## 1. Introduction

Evidence of hermeneutical reflection exists from Antiquity, but it was not until the time of the Reformation that hermeneutics as a developed theory about interpretations of texts took form.<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus published his *Clavis scripturae sacrae* in 1567 with a number of rules for the interpretation of the Scriptures, and he is sometimes acknowledged as the founder of hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup> Thus, originally,

work of American theologian John Howard Yoder, presents his understanding of the Christian church as a socially embodied tradition, outlines some central aspects of his understanding of the life of the Church with the biblical Scriptures, and lastly discusses an important consequence of his hermeneutic position.

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nischen Theologen John Howard Yoder vor und legt dessen Verständnis dar von der christlichen Gemeinde als einer gemeinschaftlich verkörpertem Tradition. Ferner skizziert er einige zentrale Aspekte von Yoders Auffassung vom Leben der Gemeinde mit der Bibel. Abschließend werden maßgebliche Auswirkungen dieser hermeneutischen Position erörtert.

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du théologien américain John Yoder, sa conception de l'Église chrétienne comme étant socialement enracinée dans une tradition, et retrace certains aspects centraux de sa conception de la vie de l'Église avec les Écritures, pour terminer en indiquant une conséquence importante de sa position herméneutique.

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hermeneutics was closely connected to texts, especially biblical and legal texts. However, this is no longer the case. Firstly, hermeneutics has disengaged itself from theology and law, and today plays an important role in a number of other disciplines such as history, psychology and political sciences; it is recognised that the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher contributed to this disengagement. Secondly, hermeneutics has expanded to deal additionally with understanding

in a more general sense; to this development the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer especially contributed.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years numerous books on theological hermeneutics have been published and it is notable how many of these contributions closely connect the biblical Scriptures with the Christian Church. This is clearly indicated in book titles such as *Reading Scripture with the Church* and *The Word of God for the People of God*.<sup>4</sup> Theological hermeneutics is a growing area of interest and, among theologians, there seems to be an increasing recognition of understanding and meaning as socially conditioned. Therefore the hermeneutical relation between the Scriptures and the Church is now being investigated in new ways.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting these studies, the present article deals with the thesis that the Scriptures are to be normative within the Church, and that the latter is to function as a hermeneutical community, which lives with and interprets these Scriptures. In engaging with this subject, I will use the writings of the American theologian John Howard Yoder. This is for several reasons. Firstly, this aspect of Yoder's theology has not yet been fully investigated.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, Yoder's thinking about this matter has rarely been utilised in recent theological hermeneutical publications, even though he can arguably contribute important insights to an understanding of the Church as a hermeneutical community. Thirdly, one still does not find a fully developed understanding about this matter in contemporary research. Thus, the English theologian Tom Wright states that even though the Christian Church cannot exist without the biblical Scriptures, one rarely finds a well-developed understanding of how the Church is to live with these Scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, this article will seek to present some central aspects of Yoder's understanding of the Church as a socially embodied tradition and of his understanding of the life of the Church with the biblical Scriptures; lastly, it will discuss an important consequence of his hermeneutical position.

## 2. Yoder's life and work<sup>8</sup>

John Howard Yoder was born on the 29th of December, 1927, in Ohio, USA. Throughout his upbringing he was a member of a Mennonite congregation, in which his family had been part of the leadership for more than one hundred years.<sup>9</sup> As a twenty-one year old, Yoder went to France

to serve the Mennonite Church. Meanwhile he attended the University of Basel, where he studied under renowned theologians such as Walter Baumgartner in Old Testament, Oscar Cullmann in New Testament, Karl Jaspers in Philosophy and Karl Barth in Dogmatics.<sup>10</sup> Barth and Cullmann especially impacted Yoder. In 1962, he defended his doctoral dissertation at the University.<sup>11</sup> Later he served as professor at Goshen Biblical Seminary, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and at the University of Notre Dame.<sup>12</sup>

During his lifetime Yoder wrote hundreds of articles and about twenty books.<sup>13</sup> He spoke English, German and French fluently, and he lectured in numerous countries.<sup>14</sup> He did not consider his theology as Mennonite, but as Catholic in the broadest sense.<sup>15</sup> Yoder acknowledged the need to learn from others, and was at the same time convinced that the Anabaptist tradition represents important insights which can benefit all Christians.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the American theologians Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp write: 'Almost singlehandedly, Yoder has caused the theological world to take seriously the Anabaptist ecclesiology and social ethics.'<sup>17</sup> As I shall show at the end of the article, many of his hermeneutical considerations can also be useful in the Lutheran context, to which I belong. John Howard Yoder died, the day after his seventieth birthday, on the 30th of December, 1997.

## 3. The Church as a socially embodied tradition

The Anabaptist tradition goes back to the Reformation. A widespread definition of Anabaptists during that time is the pure and simple statement: 'All groups who practiced believers' baptism in the reformation era.'<sup>18</sup> However, many Protestants and Catholics regarded believers' baptism as a heresy, and therefore they mistreated, persecuted and tortured the Anabaptists in order not only to stop their growth, but to ensure that these heretics should abjure their faith, so that they might be saved.

The Anabaptist tradition can also be characterised in other ways. However, since it spread rapidly to a relatively large geographical area, devolved theologically in a variety of ways, and did not develop major theological records to a great extent, it is important not to characterise the movement in an over-simplified manner. Nevertheless it is in order to say that the early Anabaptist tradi-

tion was characterised by a refusal to use violence, that it embraced a symbolic understanding of the sacraments, adopted a separatist position in relation to worldly authorities, emphasised the priesthood of all believers, and placed a strong focus on Christian ethics in which church discipline and, at times, communal ownership, was stressed.<sup>19</sup>

Yoder himself was not a radical Anabaptist. He was not Amish or Hutterite, but a Mennonite. Thus he belonged to the more moderate wing of the modern Anabaptist tradition.<sup>20</sup> His writings present an Anabaptist theological position which does not understand the Church as a remote colony, denouncing the use of modern electronic equipment. However, Yoder does understand the Church as a distinct people with a distinct way of life and a distinct way of understanding the world. Accordingly, central to his position is the understanding of the Church as a socially embodied tradition, which usually has a minority position in society. Yoder believes that this ecclesiological emphasis mirrors the understanding of the Church in the New Testament. Thus, he emphasizes that the Church has a citizenship which is not of this world, and that Christians should obey God more than human authorities (Phil 3:20; Acts 5:29). When individuals become part of the body of Christ, they become part of a distinct community, a new human race, a chosen people and a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9). Yoder believes that the loyalty of this distinct community to Christ should not be suspended by any other loyalties in this world.<sup>21</sup> He states:

No political nation, no geographical homeland to which one belongs by birth, can take precedence over the heavenly citizenship of a Christian in one's new birth.<sup>22</sup>

This distinct people gathers to discern what it means follow Christ. However, Yoder argues that many ethicists have questioned the close connection between Christology and ethics, and have contributed to the separation of the two. He believes that this move bypasses the divine authority of Jesus. Consequently he commenced working on a reintegration of Christology and ethics, so that the life and work of Jesus could again become the norm for Christian ethics.<sup>23</sup> In other words:

Yoder believes that the life and work of Jesus is relevant for Christian ethics. The life of Jesus is a paradigm for how Christians should exist in this world. This close connection between Christology and ethics is found in the Christian

canon and in the Christian tradition and has significance for all Christians today.<sup>24</sup>

Yoder expresses his Christological ethics in this way:

He gave them a new way to deal with offenders – by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence – by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money – by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership – by drawing upon the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society – by building a new order, not smashing the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between men and women, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person.<sup>25</sup>

Another important aspect of the life of disciples of Christ is that, according to Yoder, Christians should expect to experience persecution on account of their faith. He argues:

Jesus suffered death on the cross because he was faithful to God in a world that is in rebellion against God. In the same way, Christians must be faithful to God in a rebellious world. This implies that as Christ suffered, Christians must be willing to suffer and must sometimes even be willing to suffer death. Jesus foresaw this and warned his disciples.<sup>26</sup>

Yoder points out that several New Testament scholars view the suffering of Jesus as exemplary for Christians (for example, see 1 Pet 2:20–22). According to Yoder, Christians should, like Christ, resist the temptation of reacting with violence when met with violence. Thus he believes that evil should be conquered with good. Christians must defeat evil by resisting to meet evil on its own terms.<sup>27</sup> Yoder refers to Paul who, he suggests, believes that it is exactly in this way that one understands what love is, namely that Christ laid down his life for his enemies (Rom 5:7–8). Thus, in the New Testament it is stated that Christians are also called to lay down their lives for their enemies (1 Jn 3:16). For Yoder this implies that the Church embodies a distinct way of ethical reasoning, different from the various ethical reflections and practices that may exist in a given society.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, to Yoder, the Church is a distinct people with a distinct way of viewing the world. It is a socially embodied tradition, which takes Christ

as its point of departure for viewing the world. Thus the divine revelation in Christ functions as an *episteme*, a distinct source for understanding the world.<sup>29</sup> The meaning of history and the world is not revealed in the powers and principalities of this world, but in Jesus Christ, the King of kings. Consequently, Huebner states:

Yoder claims that the concrete body of the church precedes any methodology or epistemology, since there is no non-neutral or non-particular place from which to produce a general method or system.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, Christians gather in the Church to understand and interpret reality in light of the revelation of Christ. Thus, Huebner adds:

The faith of the church becomes unintelligible when it is expressed in abstraction from a life of disciplined imitation of Christ. The church does not develop and seek to sustain a stable, settled body of knowledge but engages in an agonizing and ongoing conversational exchange.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the Church generates a way of viewing the world which is determined by the revelation of Christ. Yoder believes this reflects 'a congregational epistemology'.<sup>32</sup>

It is within this context that Yoder's thinking about the Church as a hermeneutical community must be understood. The Church is a distinct community which must be ready to experience hatred and opposition, but nevertheless meets to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and meets to read their holy Scriptures in order to understand themselves and their lives in light of these Scriptures.

#### 4. The Church as a hermeneutical community

Yoder rejects any attempt to apply one predetermined method in the interpretation of the biblical Scriptures. He refers to Paul, who, as he seeks to show, demonstrates great creativity and flexibility in his interpretative strategies.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Yoder's writings reflect explicit reservations against preoccupation with methodology.<sup>34</sup> Even though he claims to be fundamentally biblical in his approach to theology, and the Bible plays an important role in his theology, he is only to a limited extent occupied with the role of Scripture in theology and in the Church in his voluminous writings.<sup>35</sup> Therefore Yoder was challenged several times regarding his hermeneutics. He responded to these challenges in articles, lectures and panel debates. A collec-

tion of such materials written by Yoder about his understanding of Scriptures was published posthumously with the title *To Hear the Word*.<sup>36</sup> In his *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, a collection of manuscripts also published posthumously, he likewise offers reflections on the subject.<sup>37</sup> In these works it is clear how Yoder invites Christians, 'to locate their lives within the ongoing stream of Christian theology'.<sup>38</sup>

As this present article indicates, Yoder views the Church as a socially embodied tradition, in which reflections on the nature and boundaries of this tradition are ongoing. Yoder believes that Christians should understand themselves as a part of this tradition, and take part in the conversations concerning the ongoing development of this tradition. According to Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider, Yoder thought that Mennonites ought to expect of their pastors, '[that they believed that] the Bible was not only descriptively correct, but was an important normative claim'.<sup>39</sup> However, it should be noted that Yoder does not see theology as a collection of boxes with a repository of infallible propositions that have to be brought into the present with minimal changes, but as 'a historical stream constituted by theological communicators [that again and again reshape it]'.<sup>40</sup> Thus Yoder believes that 'theology should be authentically dialogical' – which means that theology should be an ongoing conversation between the Christian canon, the Christian tradition and the present.<sup>41</sup> In this way he invites Christians to employ various sources to reflect upon and test the prevailing theology of the Church. He invites Christians 'to discover what we may have missed, as well as to check for balance, completeness, or coherence'.<sup>42</sup>

Although Yoder is reluctant to outline clear guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture, some principles can be identified. As the Canadian theologian Paul G. Doerksen states, 'Some kind of grid is clearly at work when Yoder reads Scripture'.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, I suggest that Yoder's thinking concerning the reading of the biblical Scriptures consists of four hermeneutical principles, which can be designated as *an authoritative principle, an exegetical principle, an applicatory principle and an ecclesial principle*.

The first principle indicates that Yoder understands the biblical Scriptures as normative, and therefore specifies that they should function as the ground floor functions in a house:

In terms of traffic patterns, you can say that you

have to go through the ground floor to get to the stairs which would lead to the other floors. In terms of architecture, you can say that it carries the weight of the upper stories.<sup>44</sup>

In line with this, Yoder emphasizes the narrative character of the Bible, asserting that, '[t]he Bible as a whole corpus of literature is narrative in its framework, although some of its fragments are not'.<sup>45</sup> Thus he stresses the correlation between the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, for Yoder, Christology is the centre of biblical narrative and creates an inner coherence for the many doctrines in Christian theology. This Christological orientation also has consequences for his understanding of the biblical Scriptures. He states that both the Bible and Christ are revelations, and that the centre of the Scriptures is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He believes that Jesus offers insight into the very nature, person and intentions of God, and that the Scriptures witness to this revelation.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Christ is a canon within the canon.<sup>47</sup> This principle is clearly reflected in his writings, which contain a considerable number of references to the Scriptures.

The second principle indicates that Yoder believes that the Scriptures themselves must provide the premises for our understanding of a given text. A text must be understood on its own terms, and therefore we must ask what its author wanted to express in his or her own context.<sup>48</sup> As Reames explains in a passage about Yoder's view on Scripture:

Each biblical author, like every historian, tried to make clear the importance of certain historical events, as he or she understood that importance and as he or she could best explain it to others living in his or her own time and place.<sup>49</sup>

Yoder underlines the fact that the Scriptures are historical documents and must be interpreted as such. It is therefore important to use the tools of literary and historical criticism to disclose what an author originally wanted to convey.<sup>50</sup> In this way, Yoder tries to protect the reading of the Scriptures against anachronistic interpretations.<sup>51</sup> This principle is also very clearly reflected in his writings as he seeks to establish an understanding of an authentic early Christianity.

The third principle makes clear that Yoder wants to interpret reality in light of the worldview of the Bible. He states that when one has reached a conclusion about what a biblical author meant, this meaning is relevant for today. What

God has done in history must be remembered, retold, and its meaning reinterpreted again and again.<sup>52</sup> For Yoder this implies that the message of the Scriptures must be sustained rather than be deformed by sophisticated modern hermeneutic interpretations. Thus the process of application implies: 'Where it is clear what it says, we are going to let that testimony count rather than subjecting it to the superior authority of our own contemporary hermeneutical framework'.<sup>53</sup> According to Yoder, this opens up the possibility of taking seriously aspects of the Bible which have been neglected for centuries, as the spiritual reality we are all embedded in, according to the worldview of the Scriptures.<sup>54</sup> As he states, '[i]t enables people to be open to the possibilities that the Bible might think with different logic than we think with'.<sup>55</sup> To Yoder the biblical Scriptures offer not only knowledge, but they also form the life of the Church, training and helping it to live in this world. This principle is also clearly reflected in his writings, as he believes that early Christianity must inspire contemporary Christianity.

The fourth principle signals Yoder's belief that the Bible ought to be read within and as a part of the Christian tradition. The Church must be a hermeneutical community, participating in an open process of interpreting the Scriptures in light of the confession to Christ as Lord and Saviour, and with the help of the Holy Spirit. This, he argues, is how the authors of the New Testament imagined these texts to be read.<sup>56</sup> According to Yoder, this open process of interpretation protects itself against authoritarian clericalism on the one side and anarchistic relativism on the other.<sup>57</sup> However, what this open process of interpretation more concretely means remains unclear for Yoder. The American theologian Philip LeMasters asks the following critical question:

For example, one could ask how the community of faith may go about appropriating the findings of biblical studies. How would they discriminate among various construals of 'what the text says?' By what standard or authority would they challenge a particular critical claim about Scripture as inappropriate for the Church? How might they avoid affirming only those findings which supported their preconceived convictions?<sup>58</sup>

Yoder does not give any answers to this question and LeMasters rightly points out that he could have helpfully substantiated his thinking about

the Church as a hermeneutical community.<sup>59</sup> In fact, this is also the case for the first three principles, which only provide guidelines and which could also have been more fully expanded.

### 5. The Scriptures in Church and society

As has been demonstrated, Yoder views the Church as a distinct people with a distinct way of life, and with a distinct way of viewing the world; as a socially embodied tradition. Within this community and tradition, the Bible function as normative, and these Scriptures guide this community and tradition. Yoder's primary interest is not how the message of the Scriptures is made intelligible and relevant for modern humans through a contextual interpretative process.<sup>60</sup> For him the Scriptures are congregational Scriptures, which are intended for reading in the Church, and whose message is directed primarily at Christians. Therefore, the interpretation of the Bible must first and foremost take place within the Christian tradition.

Stanley Hauerwas shares much of Yoder's theological agenda, also when it comes to the understanding of the Scriptures. As for Yoder, it is decisive for Hauerwas to understand the Church as a socially embodied tradition, in which the Bible ought to be read and interpreted. Thus, he writes,

North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their 'common sense' is sufficient for 'understanding' Scripture.<sup>61</sup>

According to both Yoder and Hauerwas, the rightful place of the Bible is in the Church. This, they suggest, is how the collection of biblical Scriptures understands itself. Hauerwas would most likely agree with the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who suggested that it is difficult to understand people from an alien culture even when their words are translated. For example, if one is to understand a religious text from an alien culture one needs to understand its language, behaviour and worldview; in the same way with the Scriptures. Thus, a deep understanding of the Bible presupposes Christian practice and committed involvement in the Church as a hermeneutical community.

This position may be seen to challenge the practice of the Gideons' distribution of Bibles.<sup>62</sup> Would

it not be better to invite hotel guests to become part of the Church than to further an individualistic reading of the Bible detached from the Church as a hermeneutical community? Yoder and Hauerwas do not primarily want to have the Scriptures read by as many people as possible; rather they wish for as many as possible to come into the Church. Thus, neither Yoder (nor Hauerwas) deny the value of a good knowledge of the Bible in society. Nonetheless, they remind us that the *Sitz im Leben* of the Scriptures is, first and foremost, the Church.

I would like to suggest that this perspective can well be applied in a Lutheran context. While Luther's reading is more individualistic than that emphasised here, the Lutheran teaching about the *zwei Regimenten* can be understood as that the Bible belongs to *das geistliche Regiment*, and as such should primarily guide the Church and not the state.<sup>63</sup> In *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit* Luther explicitly states that the Sermon on the Mount is only intended for Christians, and that the world should not be ruled by the gospel.<sup>64</sup> This does not mean that the Church should not criticise the state,<sup>65</sup> but that it cannot expect that the ethical instructions of the Bible will be accepted as normative in public ethical debates. This does not deny, of course, that the Scriptures can still be an important source of inspiration for society.

However, Lutheran theology will disagree when it is suggested that the authority of the Church is more fundamental than the Bible.<sup>66</sup> Here, Lutheran theology will maintain that the authority of the Scriptures in the end stands over the Christian tradition, and that the Christian Church, with help from the Holy Spirit, will be guided by the message of the Bible. However, this does not mean that Lutheran theology cannot operate with the Church as a distinct people, as a socially embodied tradition. The situation can be illustrated with two concentric circles, where the Scriptures play one role in the Church and another role in society; where the Church functions as the primary framework of interpretation, and where the Bible must assert itself in society on different premises.<sup>67</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

This article has provided a short introduction to theological hermeneutics, claiming that a common feature among many new contributions to this field is that the Scriptures and the Church are closely connected. In the light of this development, the article has introduced the work of John

Howard Yoder as one who can helpfully contribute to an understanding of the life of the Church with the Scriptures. For too long many theologians have been primarily occupied with the historical accuracy of the Scriptures, and have not paid much attention to the issues raised here. However, this article has argued that the Church should be considered as a social embodiment of the Christian tradition, in which the Scriptures are considered normative, and therefore these Scriptures guide this tradition. Through using Yoder (and Hauerwas), it has argued that the authority of the Scriptures is only acknowledged within the Church and Christian tradition, and that the true nature of the biblical Scriptures is to be normative within this community and tradition, and thus to have a formative function for Christians. The article has also spelled out some ethical implications of viewing the Church as a hermeneutical community.<sup>68</sup>

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### Endnotes

- 2 For example, see Thomas Krogh *et al.*, *Historie, forståelse og fortolkning: De historisk-filosofiske fags fremvekst og arbejdsmåter* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2011) 219–220; see also Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 1.
- 2 However, sometimes Friedrich Schleiermacher is acknowledged as the founder of hermeneutics.
- 3 See Jan-Olav Henriksen (ed.), *Tegn, tekst og talk: Teologisk hermeneutik i fortid og nutid* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1994) and Krogh *et al.*, *Historie, forståelse og fortolkning*.
- 4 For example, see A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Shane Berg and Matthew L. Skinner, *Shaping the Scriptural Imagination: Truth, Meaning, and the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009); Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T & T Clark, 2009). I have also referred to these publications in Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen and Kristian Kappel, 'Menighedens liv med Bibelen: Kevin J. Vanhoozers bidrag til udviklingen af en ekklesiologisk hermeneutik', *Dansk Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 40.2 (2013) 132–133.
- 5 Nikolajsen and Kappel, 'Menighedens liv med Bibelen', 121–122; Tom Wright also states that theological hermeneutics is a growing area of interest today; see Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, revised and expanded edition (London: SPCK, 2013) ix.
- 6 Two important contributions which shed light on these aspects of Yoder's theology are by the American theologians Michael G. Cartwright, *Practices, Politics, and Performance: Toward a Communal Hermeneutic for Christian Ethics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006) and Kent Reames, *Histories of Reason and Revelation with Alasdair MacIntyre and John Howard Yoder into Historicist Theology and Ethics* (unpublished dissertation; University of Chicago, 1997). Cartwright's interest is primarily ethical, while Reames tries to expose some theological-hermeneutical principles in Yoder's understanding of how the Scriptures ought to be read. However, Reames' position is different from mine, see Reames, *Histories of Reason and Revelation*, 125–128.
- 7 Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, ix.
- 8 This short introduction is built on my book *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015) 95–96. For some decades, it has been known that Yoder violated numerous women sexually, mostly students. As a consequence he lost his position at Goshen Biblical Seminary. This also led to a disciplinary process in the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, and consequently he admitted his misconduct. In recent years, the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, the former Goshen Biblical Seminary, and the Mennonite Church USA have made a huge effort in various ways to deal with this fact. Some scholars – especially Mennonite scholars – find it difficult to continue to read and refer to Yoder. Personally, I am very saddened about Yoder's behaviour and try to deal critically with both his actions and his writings.
- 9 Mark T. Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 3.



- 10 Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 16, 18, 77; Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford: Cascadia, 2007) 33, 101–102, 105.
- 11 The dissertation was published with the title *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz: Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523–1538* (Karlsruhe: H. Schneider, 1962).
- 12 Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 21–24.
- 13 Mark T. Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1997).
- 14 Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 25–26.
- 15 John H. Yoder, 'Introduction' in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 8; Arne Rasmusson, 'Revolutionary Subordination: A Biblical Concept of Resistance in the Theology of John Howard Yoder' in *Peace in Europe, Peace in the World: Conflict Resolution and the Use of Violence* (Iustitia et Pax Dokumentation 3; Wien: Südwind-Verlag, 2002) 40.
- 16 For Yoder's understanding of ecumenism, see John C. Nugent (ed.), *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010).
- 17 Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: The Power of the Worshipping Community in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 133.
- 18 Thomas A. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 101.
- 19 A number of important primary sources from the early Anabaptist history are accessible and collected in one book; see Walter Klaassen (ed.), *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1981). In addition several monographs deal with the early history of the Anabaptist movement, for example William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); for a systematic-theological introduction to Anabaptist theology, see Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*.
- 20 With the moderate wing of the Anabaptist tradition, I refer to Mennonites who are making use of modern inventions and remedies and not living in isolated colonies.
- 21 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015) 111.
- 22 John H. Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1985) 23.
- 23 On this, see John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 1–20.
- 24 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, 'Kirkens mulighed for at genvinde sig selv' in Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen (ed.), *National kristendom til debat* (Fredericia: Kolon, 2015) 151; my own translation.
- 25 John H. Yoder, 'The Original Revolution' in *The Original Revolution* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1971) 29.
- 26 Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*, 130.
- 27 Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace*, 17.
- 28 Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*, 128.
- 29 Cf. Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*, 181.
- 30 Christ K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale: Herald, 2006) 59.
- 31 Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 143–144.
- 32 John H. Yoder, 'The Forms of Possible Obedience' (unpublished paper in *The John Howard Yoder Archives* at Goshen College, USA, 1970) paragraph two. Above, I have presented some of the most important aspects of Yoder's understanding of the Church as a social embodiment of the Christian tradition, yet have omitted important eschatological perspectives; for a fuller exposition of this, see Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*, chapter 3.
- 33 John H. Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 110.
- 34 Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 59; John H. Yoder, 'Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture' in Michael G. Cartwright (ed.), *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1998) 372.
- 35 Yoder categorizes his reading of Scripture as *Biblical Realism*. This expression is not his own, but was promoted by a hermeneutical movement in the 1950s and 1960s. He states that *Biblical Realism* never became a real school and never really got momentum. He refers to Paul Minear and Marcus Barth as its representatives; see John H. Yoder, 'Twenty Years Later' (unpublished paper in *The John Howard Yoder Archives* at Goshen College, USA, 1991) 1; John H. Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001) 125–136; Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, viii; see also Reames, *Histories of Reason and Revelation*, 125.
- 36 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*.
- 37 Yoder, *Preface to Theology*.
- 38 Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider, 'Introduction' in Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 14.
- 39 Hauerwas and Sider, 'Introduction', 22.
- 40 Hauerwas and Sider, 'Introduction', 10.
- 41 Cf. Paul G. Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in John Howard Yoder and Oliver O'Donovan* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2009) 25.
- 42 Hauerwas and Sider, 'Introduction', 19.
- 43 Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 18.
- 44 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 71, 77; see also Hauerwas and Sider, 'Introduction', 10, 22.

- 45 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 77–78.
- 46 This should not be understood as a fundamentalist understanding of the authority of the biblical Scriptures, from which he explicitly distances himself; for example, see Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, viii; John H. Yoder, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*' in Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager and John H. Yoder (eds), *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 84.
- 47 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 77.
- 48 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 125–144.
- 49 Reames, *Histories of Reason and Revelation*, 127.
- 50 Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, viii.
- 51 John H. Yoder, 'But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth' in John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 53–54.
- 52 Reames, *Histories of Reason and Revelation*, 127.
- 53 Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 81.
- 54 Philip LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology in John Howard Yoder's Critique of Constantinianism* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992) 37.
- 55 Quoted in LeMasters, *Import of Eschatology*, 37.
- 56 Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*, 181.
- 57 John H. Yoder, 'The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective' in Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 24–25.
- 58 LeMasters, *Import of Eschatology*, 56–57.
- 59 Parts of section four in this article were included in my dissertation but omitted when it was published; see Nikolajsen, *Distinctive Identity of the Church*; see also note 68.
- 60 Cf. Arne Rasmusson, 'Att leva med Bibln som berättelse – en narrativ och ecklesiologisk hermeneutik', *Dansk Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 41.3 (2014) 231–250.
- 61 Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 15.
- 62 See <https://www2.gideons.org/> [accessed 22/05/2018].
- 63 In my view Luther's teaching about *den zwei Regimenten* is inconsistent. Unfortunately, I can only refer to an article in Danish, which makes my position clear: Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, 'Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund' in Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen (ed.), *Kirke og øvrighed i et pluralistisk samfund* (Fredericia: Kolon, 2017).
- 64 D. Martin Luthers Werke, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 11,251–252 (*Von weltlicher Obrichkeit*).
- 65 D. Martin Luthers Werke, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 31.1,197–198 (*Der 82. Psalm ausgelegt*).
- 66 Cf. Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 23.
- 67 Therefore the Danish theologian Ebbe Pedersen refers to Luther as one who differentiated between an external clarity of Scripture which is accessible for all, and an internal clarity of Scripture which is only accessible for Christians; see Ebbe Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther som skriftfortolker: En studie i Luthers skriftsyn, hermeneutik og eksegese* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959) 57, cf. 120; see also D. Martin Luthers Werke, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 18,609 (*De Servo Arbitrio*).
- 68 This article is a translation of 'Menighedens liv med Bibelen: Menigheden som hermeneutisk fællesskab ifølge John Howard Yoder', *Dansk Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 42.1 (2015). Small revisions have been made.