



John Howard Yoder's
Body Politics
SIMPLIFIED

**Five Practices of the Christian Community
Before the Watching World**

Preface to the simplified version

In 2004, my church, Perth Anabaptist Fellowship, followed up a study of Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* by studying *Body Politics*. We read it out loud week to week and discussed the five practices he writes about. These practices were a foundation for what we were trying to do, a way to think about our life together as an Anabaptist house-church. They suggested to us a way to live Anabaptism.

This simplified version of John Howard Yoder's *Body Politics* aims to make his ideas more accessible, so more people can benefit from them. Yoder had a brilliant mind which managed to hold many strands of thought at once, and constantly divert on interesting and difficult tangents. He is constantly challenging all the assumptions we make. Many of his sentences are dense. For these reasons, a simplified version is helpful. I have kept some tangents because they make brilliant points. I have left out others that seem less important to non-academics. I have tried to keep the language simple; sometimes this makes the meaning less precise than the technical term. At other times, there doesn't seem to be any other way to say something than to use a big word.

This simplification has been specially prepared for the 2007 Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand biennial conference, to be held in Pinjarra, Western Australia. The theme of the conference is 'Living Anabaptism', with speakers addressing the practices Yoder talks about here. The hope of the conference is to get Australian and New Zealand Christians thinking about how they can live out an Anabaptist vision of church.

Our church blog is at <http://perthanabaptists.blogspot.com>. My homepage, including the simplification of *The Politics of Jesus* and a short course, *The Body of Christ : An introduction to Christianity from an Anabaptist perspective*, is at www.geocities.com/savageparade. If you have any comments about this simplification, please email me at savageparade@yahoo.com.au.

Thanks to Brad Schilling and my wife, Nicole Hobby, for editing this book and encouraging me, as well as my whole church for being the body where I can be a part of these practices.

- Nathan Hobby, 7 November 2006

Introduction

This is a book about the life of the church. You might, then, be wondering about the title. Why use the word 'politics'?

For most people, 'politics' is what politicians do. It is a nasty world of spin-doctors, polling, election promises and political parties with beliefs about the way the world should be run. Rest assured that Yoder definitely doesn't want your church to become like this.

Some Christians believe we should avoid all involvement in this world of politics. Other Christians believe that we should be involved in all of life, politics included. They say being involved in politics - becoming a politician - is something some Christians are called to. Thus America has had a succession of 'Christian' presidents, voted for by many Christians who believe that this is Christian politics.

Just as politics is something politicians do, most Christians think worship is what the church does, and it is separate from politics. In fact, they think worship is not only separate from politics - it is also separate from everyday life.

There *are* some Christians who want to bridge the gap between the world of worship and either everyday life or politics. There are two common approaches, using different bridges:

- Liberals (and some evangelicals and Anabaptists) believe the bridge is the set of insights into justice and peace that worship helps us reach. For example, worship reminds us of God's creation and our role in looking after it; we leave the worship service caring more about the environment and ready to change our lifestyle. Another example - worship reminds us to care for the poor; we go home and do it.
- For many evangelicals, the bridge is a new set of insides. Worship modifies our 'hearts'. For example, it may fill us up with a sense of God's love and forgiveness. This may encourage us to go home and care more about the needy.

In both cases, worship is separate from politics or everyday life. We get help in politics or real life through worship, but worship is *not* political and it is *not* everyday life.

What if worship is meant to be both political *and* a part of everyday life?

Our English word 'political' has its roots in the Greek word 'polis'. 'Polis' is often translated 'city', but it doesn't just mean the streets and the houses or even just the residents. It means the way in which the people live together and make decisions, the way they structure their common life. This is a good way to begin understanding what Yoder means by 'political'.

This book pictures the church as a political body. Not political in that sense we mentioned earlier of spin doctors and elections. But political in the sense that it is a structured social body. Political in the sense that the church makes decisions, assigns roles and distributes power.

Where are these political practices to be found in the church?

Not just in the members' meeting, not just in the pastor's office, not just behind the scenes. No - these practices are to be found in worship! Yoder wants us to return to the Bible to find that baptism, the Lord's Supper, the open meeting, church discipline and the gifts of all believers are political, everyday worship practices.

That's not all. Not only should these practices be reclaimed as political and everyday; they are also the pattern for what the world is ultimately meant to be! As the church, we get a chance to live out life to its fullest *now*, as a beacon to the rest of the world. The people of God are called today to be what the world is called to be ultimately.

This book, then, picks up five sample practices (there could be more) God called the early Christians to live out. It then also shows how they can offer a pattern of life for the whole world. Yoder shows us secular applications of these Christian practices, and thus shows us how the church is politically relevant.

Discussion questions

1. What is the relationship between worship and everyday life for you?
2. If we take Yoder's definition of political (makes decisions, assigns roles, distributes power), do you agree that churches are *always* political?

Chapter 1 – Binding and loosing

Group discernment and church discipline

Jesus gives to the church the authority to decide things in God's name. This is called binding and loosing, and it takes the form of dialogue, sometimes between two believers, sometimes amongst a whole congregation. At times its purpose is to reconcile a sinner. Other times its purpose is to decide the best thing to do in a particular situation.

What is 'binding and loosing'?

'If another member of the church sins ~~against you~~, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

'Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

- Matt. 18:15-20 (NRSV)

In this passage, Jesus instructed his disciples that when they bind and loose, their actions would be the actions of God at the same time – 'What you bind on earth is bound in heaven' (Matt. 18:18).

Binding and loosing brings together two types of dialogue under the same name – reconciling and discerning.

- *Reconciling dialogue* involves restoring to the community a brother or sister who has sinned. We can understand what Jesus means here quite easily – he gives us instructions on how to win the brother or sister back from their sin. We are to make three attempts. The first attempt is just the two of us face to face, avoiding disgrace and avoiding gossip. If this doesn't work, we bring in a third person as a mediator and witness to get an outside perspective. If this still doesn't work we finally bring it to the whole congregation. If the offender won't do the right thing by the rest of the congregation, he or she will be treated as an outsider until they are willing to repent.

Jesus makes clear:

1. We all have a duty to reconcile, confess and forgive each other – not just the minister. Anyone who sees his brother or sister in sin has a responsibility to help them.
2. We are aiming to restore the brother or sister, not punish them.
3. We shouldn't save this just for major offences; any offence is forgivable but none is trivial.
4. We have the authority to forgive one another in God's name.

(Some versions of the Matthew text read, 'if your brother or sister sins *against you*.' People use these last two words

to limit the process to cases of personal offence. But these two words are not in the earliest manuscripts of Matthew or in the parallel verse in Luke 17:3. We are called on to help our brother or sister back to spiritual health even when we're not the one sinned against.)

- *Discerning dialogue* involves working out what God wants us to do in a particular situation. Its meaning is less obvious to us reading today than *reconciling* - we need to know the background.

'Bind' and 'loose' were two words with special meaning for the Jews. They were used to describe the process of trying to work out how the Law applied to a particular situation. If a rabbi decided a law did apply to a particular situation, he was 'binding' it. Jews were obligated to apply it. If he decided it did not apply to a particular situation, he was 'loosing' this law. Jews were 'loosed' from the obligation to apply it.

In his essay, "Binding and Loosing – a paradigm for ethical discernment" (available online from www.findarticles.com), Mark Allan Powell writes:

For example, the question was raised whether one might be guilty of stealing if one finds something and keeps it without searching for the rightful owner. When is such a search required, and how extensive must it be? The Talmud states, "If a fledgling bird is found within fifty cubits of a dovecote, it belongs to the owner of the dovecote. If it is found outside the limits of fifty cubits, it belongs to the person who finds it"

To use Matthew's terminology, the decision was that the law ("Do not steal") was bound when the bird was found in proximity to its likely owner; one who keeps the bird under such conditions has transgressed the law and is guilty of sin. But the law is loosed when the bird is found at a distance from any likely owner; the law against stealing does not forbid keeping the bird in that instance.

We are given authority by Jesus to carry on this process in the church. Not to apply the Law to our particular situations, but to apply Jesus to particular situations. Some of the questions we decide by binding and loosing will be personal ones; other questions will be practical and moral questions for the church.

Abuses of church discipline

Church discipline has a bad name. There are many Christians who have been scarred by churches which practice strict discipline. For many, the antidote is no discipline at all. But, as Lois Barrett says in *Building the house church*, the antidote to 'bad' discipline is not 'no' discipline, but 'good' discipline. There are key guidelines for church discipline implicit in what Jesus was saying, and any practice of church discipline needs to remember them:

1. The intention is to win the brother or sister – not punish them.
2. It shouldn't make the leaders more powerful. All members are responsible for discipling their brothers and sisters, not just leaders. In many abuses of church discipline, leaders use their power to discipline others to control the church and further their own ends.

3. It is not a procedure just for *small* sins, while big ones are dealt with more strictly – all are treated the same.
4. It is not, as others have argued, to be used only on *big* sins while we try to forget about small ones.

Church discipline relies on voluntariness. We can practice reconciling dialogue because we choose to place ourselves in such a relationship. Where the relationship is involuntary, church discipline is abusive. The Puritans practiced involuntary church discipline, and it gave the word 'Puritan' a bad taste; in their society everyone was *forced* to accept discipline, and that discipline aimed to punish rather than restore.

Yoder believes that distortions and abuses arise when the label 'discipline' is used for the process. The foundation – reconciling dialogue – gets lost; the image becomes punishing authority rather than reconciliation.

Relationship between discernment and reconciliation

You can only confront your brother or sister in their sin after you have both agreed on what is right and wrong. So reconciliation presupposes discernment. For the process to work, you need to be in a church community which talks about its ethics, decides together what standards to hold each other to, and then holds each other to them through reconciling dialogue.

The process of reconciling dialogue will also involve further discernment – the ethics the church decided on before might prove to be misguided or not applicable to a particular situation. You can also work out which issues cause offence and so need to be agreed on, and which ones you can agree to differ on.

Much Christian debate about moral issues makes the mistake of focusing on what the standards ought to be - instead of how they are to be worked out and put in place. The New Testament does not give us a book of rules applicable to every moral situation. If a full system of rules was inspired by God and written down for a particular time and place, it would be out of date or out of place in another situation. Instead, the New Testament gives us a process – binding and loosing – and examples of a church full of the Holy Spirit practising binding and loosing, and coming to agreement on moral issues. By giving us this process, God has allowed us to find out what following Jesus means in any new situation.

The church's empowerment to make moral decisions is summed up well in John 16:7, 12, where Jesus says, '... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I did not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.'

That promised guide, the Holy Spirit, will work in the church to tell us the meaning of following Jesus in unforeseen situations. The Holy Spirit guides a fully human communication process – binding and loosing. It is a process that has some things in common with what we call today 'conflict resolution'. It encourages us to benefit from different perspectives on any question and to use loving negotiation to come to answers. The conclusion of the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15:28 – 'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' – is the conclusion that the Holy Spirit will help us to reach when we discuss issues and come to a decision.

Binding and loosing in church history

Binding and loosing as we've been describing it gives more authority to the church than Roman Catholicism; it trusts more to the Holy Spirit than Pentecostalism; has more respect for the individual than liberal humanism; makes moral standards more binding than Puritanism; and is more open to new situations than the 'new morality' movement in the 1960s. If practiced, it would radically restructure the life of churches.

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, many people recognised the importance of binding and loosing to the church. Martin Luther, Calvin's teacher Martin Bucer and the Anabaptists called the process 'the Rule of Christ'. They believed this process could move the Reformation from the university to the lives of ordinary Christians.

In September 1524, the first Anabaptists wrote to the German radical Thomas Muntzer, rejecting his revolutionary violence and urging him to use the Rule of Christ instead:

March forward with the Word and create a Christian church with the help of Christ and His Rule such as we find instituted in Matthew 18 and practiced in the epistles. (Leland Harder (ed) *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, p.284)

Later renewal movements, including John Wesley, have restored binding and loosing in one way or another. Wesley's classes and bands performed this function. Today, many evangelical churches urge their members to find a discipleship partner to confess sins to, and to receive forgiveness from each other. This practice begins to live out what Jesus was talking about.

The meaning for the church today

Like the rest of the world, churches don't usually follow Jesus' command in Matthew 18. Yoder observes that today, recovering binding and loosing can change the way we think about pastoral care and congregational decision making. It offers a third way between legalism and non-directive counselling. If we are to even begin trying to put Matthew 18 into practice, we need to flesh this out some more, and so I add the following ideas:

1. ***Going directly to our brother or sister when we're offended.*** It sounds like a small thing, but it would actually make a huge difference to the life of churches. Too often, instead of telling the person who has offended them, Christians tell someone else and get this third person on their side. Gossip and bitterness replace honesty and love. In fact, the failure to follow Matthew 18 holds churches back from developing true Christian community.

In going directly to our brother or sister, we prevent conflict from escalating. We develop honesty between each other, and we begin to truly understand each other. For example, I might be getting angrier and angrier that each week a newcomer to our church argues passionately against theological points other people make during discussion. My first impulse is to complain to others in the church who would agree with me that he is argumentative and difficult. But instead, I decide to talk to him about it, just between the two of us. He tells me that he had no idea that was the way he came across; the only way he is used to talking about theology is in a debating style like he was taught when he studied at university. I tell him that our Sunday meetings are more aimed at encouraging each other to follow Jesus than at debating theology for its own sake. He says that in

future he will be less argumentative and more focused on encouraging. I come away with a better understanding of why he is the way he is; he understands our church's expectations better.

2. ***Bringing big decisions to the church.*** Too often we're like the rest of the world, thinking that as Christians we're morally independent of each other, and need to wrestle with our own conscience to come up with the answers to the questions in our lives. But what we do affects the others in our church, especially as we develop closer community. We have to work out how far we are willing to take this, but at the very least we should be taking big decisions to our church for prayer and discernment. The advice will not be binding, but it is likely to be helpful. Jesus also suggests that it will reflect what God wants. In a house church, the appropriate time for discernment is often in the sharing time of the worship meeting. In a conventional church, you might need to look to your small group to provide the prayer and discernment Jesus talks about. The sort of decisions might include –

- 'My lease is running out. Where should I live?' (When I asked this of my church, they suggested I move closer to the rest of them, rather than closer to work; I did so and it helped build up the life of our church.)
- 'I'm thinking of changing jobs.' (Perhaps your church will ask you what effect the new job will have on your family life, the amount of time you have to serve God, your leisure time. Perhaps someone in the church will know about an even better job opportunity.)

3. ***Discerning Christian ethics as a church.*** Ethics are not for the individual conscience either. We have to work out together as a church in what ways Jesus' life and words and the example of the early church are 'binding' on a particular situation. We work out what following Jesus means so that we can then help each other when we sin by not living up to it.

The sort of issues you will want to discuss together and come to consensus in the Holy Spirit will include things like the following questions (there is overlap with the previous point; often moral issues arise in the context of decisions) –

- What should our attitude to money be? ('I'd like to buy a house so I can stop renting, but the prospect is taking over my life!')
- How do we respond to defacto marriages? ('I have a non-Christian child living in one!')
- What response should we make to the Iraq War? ('I think we all should go on a protest march!')

Following Matthew 18 breathes new life into churches. It is a practice which clearly distinguishes churches from the rest of the world. It builds a foundation of honesty and understanding. On this foundation, God builds true Christian community.

Importance for the world

The principles of conflict resolution in the secular world are not very different from those of binding and loosing. Conflict resolution is often a good alternative to bitter and expensive legal battles. Yoder sums up these principles like this, showing their similarity to binding and loosing:

1. The intention is not punishment but resolution.

2. The two parties share a common value which is used as a frame of reference.
3. The mediator tries to find a solution where both parties will win.
4. The first efforts are made in ways which minimise publicity and threat, and maximise flexibility without risk of shame.
5. If the negotiations fail, the ultimate sanction is public disavowal of the party refusing reconciliation.

In the USA, a program rooted in these ideas has become very successful – Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP), a largely church based ministry intervening (with the court's approval) in criminal cases. It often takes the place of all or some of the legal system's punishments. Unlike the legal system, VORP recognises how important the victim is, and that punishment of the offender will not necessarily heal the wounds.

Conclusion

To sum up, to be human is to be in conflict, to offend and to be offended. To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it. When we do that, we discover that out of conflict can come an important mode of truth-finding and community-building. This is true in the church; it is also true in the world.

Discussion questions

1. How do people in your life usually handle conflict? What works well?
2. Try summing up what Yoder is saying in this chapter. (Don't evaluate it yet; just sum it up.)
3. Are you convinced that Jesus intended us to go directly to a person who offends us?
4. What sort of decisions would you like to be able to bring to your church for discernment? How would you like the process to work? (Ie : how many people would there be listening to you; would it be a part of a church meeting or midweek meeting or something else; what influence would their advice have on you?)
5. Do you think 'binding and loosing' can help in criminal and civil legal cases?

Chapter 2 - Disciples break bread together

The Lord's Supper is a shared meal

In the early church, the Lord's Supper was not originally a ritual or a symbolic piece of bread and mouth of wine. Instead, it was a real meal shared by the disciples. The rich provided food for the poor. The sharing at the common meal extended into the rest of life too, with disciples sharing their money, time and resources.

The simple meaning of the Lord's Supper

And he [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

- Luke 22:19

We probably think we know what Jesus meant when he said this. But we've covered over what he said with centuries of ceremonies and arguments about what those ceremonies mean. For too long, Christian thinking about the Lord's Supper has been sidetracked by abstract questions about the meaning of the bread and wine, and what happens to them when the right words are spoken by a priest. These questions keep us away from the simple meaning of the text.

What were the disciples meant to do in his memory? It can't mean 'Whenever you celebrate Holy Communion'; there was no such thing as 'Holy Communion' or the 'Lord's Supper'.

Yoder suggests two ways we could begin thinking about the question of the Lord's Supper:

- *Uncovering the distortions* - It would be useful to track how the straightforward meaning of the Lord's Supper gave way to ritualistic and superstitious understandings. One key point was when the state and church merged in the fourth century. The church changed the economic meaning of the Lord's Supper to allow those with wealth and power to join in without changing their lifestyle. (A similar shift happened with baptism, as you will read in chapter three.)
- *Recovering the cultural context* - It would also be useful to get an understanding of the social meaning of eating together in the first century. In most cultures, common meals have special meanings. We could look to the Old Testament and think about the Passover meal and the manna in the wilderness. We could review the prophets' predictions about a coming messianic banquet.

But for now, we will just make a simple reading of the Gospel text. What did Jesus mean? What were the first Christians doing when they did it?

The meal just before Jesus' death was in a Passover setting. So Jesus *could* have meant 'whenever you celebrate the *Passover* do it in remembrance of me'. But that is not what his hearers took him to mean. The Passover is celebrated once a year; what the disciples did in his memory was much more often.

Jesus' first followers took him to mean 'whenever you have your common meal do it in remembrance of me.' The meal Jesus claimed as his memorial was their ordinary eating together.

We already see the connection between eating together and remembering Jesus in the resurrection appearances. The disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24) do not recognise Jesus while he walks with them. It is only when he thanks God for the bread (24:30) that they recognise him. The other disciples don't believe their story until Jesus appears again and eats with them (vv41-43). We find the same pattern in Acts 1:4 and John 21:9-13

Eating together in the first church

In Acts, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers during Pentecost. It is not surprising that the Pentecost story ends with more common meals. The disciples' life together is summarised in four activities - they "remained faithful to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers" (2:42) and "they met in houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously" (2:46, Yoder's translations).

From sharing food together, the disciples went on to sharing money – "no-one claimed for his own use anything that he had" (4:32). This sharing was a natural extension of the common meal.

The common meal was not something new. It carried on the way of life Jesus and his disciples had led while they were going from town to town, teaching and healing. As early as Luke 8, there is a reference to the way Jesus and the disciples were fed by donations provided for by others.

The common meal was central to the life of the early church; they were prepared to change the structure of their church for the sake of it. This is shown in Acts 6. The incident begins with a problem between the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrew-speaking Jews. The Greek-speaking Jews were born outside of Palestine. The widows among them, who depended on the food from the common table, were missing out in favour of the Hebrew-speaking Jews. The apostles ask the believers to choose from among themselves seven deacons to make sure the bread is shared equally. The seven chosen all seem to have Greek names.

Yoder sees two important points:

- The sharing of food was so important that it led to the apostles reorganising the leadership of the church to make sure it was done fairly.
- The appointment of Greek-speaking deacons shows a church adapting to new members and their culture. It is an attitude that saw the church grow from a few gatherings in Palestine to world mission.

The importance of eating together continues throughout Acts and Paul's letters to the churches. Some examples:

- Acts 15 - The church calls a conference to resolve the question of table fellowship, laying the foundation for a missionary policy that would be free to welcome Gentiles.
- 1 Corinthians - many of the questions Paul is answering concern table fellowship - meat offered to idols (chapters 8 and 10); and a table divided according to class (chapter 11). Paul tells the Corinthians that if their meal together fails to overcome social divisions, then they are celebrating their own condemnation.

The Old Testament pictures the messianic age as a banquet (Isaiah 25:6-10a; Ezekiel 39:17-20). In celebrating fellowship around the table, the early Christians showed that this messianic age, this banquet had begun. Men and women gathered together around food in a new family with Jesus as its head.

Further dimensions of the celebration

The Lord's Supper echoes with other Bible stories, too, and these are a part of its meaning:

- The fact that Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover when Jesus asked them to eat together in his memory, connects us to the story of the people of God in the Old Testament. The Passover was an act of worship in the form of a meal which remembered the flight from Egypt, when God liberated his people from the Egyptians.
- The disciples would have remembered the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand earlier in Jesus' ministry. These miracles were a taste of what was to come - the messianic banquet celebrated by the early church now, and one day to be celebrated by the whole world when Jesus comes again.

The basic economic fact

We must not let the symbolic meanings and importance of the Lord's Supper take us away from the literal importance of it. For the early church, the food shared in the Lord's Supper did not just symbolise daily sustenance; it *was* daily sustenance. The primary meaning of the Lord's Supper was not ceremonial - it was economic.

The sharing was real, and it was necessary because the disciples depended on each other like a family depends on each other. We must remember that many in the movement had left behind families or jobs, or had sold their houses and placed the money in a common fund. They were no longer financially independent; they were now dependent on each other. In eating together, the disciples looked after each other like a family looks after each other.

The detour of interpretation as special 'ritual'

When we understand the Lord's Supper as a set-apart religious ritual in a worship service, we miss how much it should change the way we live together.

When we realise that the Lord's Supper is about sharing food and money with other believers, we see the economic newness of the Kingdom of God. The way we handle food and money in the Kingdom of God is different to the way the world handles these things. In fact, we are showing the world how they will ultimately live when Jesus returns.

It's not Communism, a system where private property is abolished and the state (in the name of the people) controls all property. Communism is a secular theory which came centuries after the Lord's Supper. It takes us away from the voluntary, Christ-centred gathering we are talking about.

But even if it's not Communism, it doesn't let us off lightly. The Lord's Supper demands radical, uncomfortable sharing and support for the poor. We must wrestle seriously with the witness of those first Christians who sold their houses to share the money with the others in the church.

Our society rewards merit and productivity. As Christians, we believe in unmerited sharing - grace - and we value the lowly, meek and poor who are not productive.

Not just food, but also status

The sharing of food and money in table fellowship leads to equality in Christ. The world judges us by our economic status - in the first century, between master and slave; in our society, between successful businessmen, investors and career-people and the unemployed or lowly skilled. But the sharing of bread and money begins a redistribution that recognises we are equal in Christ, and which condemns the snobbery which says some people are better than others.

Economic radicals in church history

It's not surprising that over the centuries, the people who have realised the economic newness of the kingdom have tended to be those on the edges of society. People like St Francis, Peter Waldo, the band of Anabaptist brethren who established a commune in 1528, the English Levellers and even some monastic orders caught this vision of what the kingdom was like, and chose to forgo status and wealth.

These economic radicals did not realise that they were practising the principles of the Lord's Supper. By medieval times, the Lord's Supper had become so distorted by abstract theological questions that everyone had lost sight of its meaning. But they still found this vision in the life and work of Jesus and the early church, even when the Lord's Supper had become something quite else.

(This is a key part of the pattern of the practices in this book – they stand up even if you disagree with the context Yoder puts them in. We are called to eat together and share money even if you insist that it's not part of what we call the Lord's Supper. Different races are called into a new people, the church, even if you don't think that's part of baptism – the theme of chapter three.)

Sharing applied to land – the Lord's Supper and the Jubilee

The Lord's Supper is related to another part of Jesus' message - the permanent Jubilee. While the Lord's Supper's first meaning is justice in consumable like food, the Jubilee is about justice at the level of capital - property, savings, investments.

In Leviticus 25, the Israelites are told to return all land to its original owners every fifty years in the year of Jubilee. By the time Jesus arrived, the Jubilee had not been practiced for centuries. It would have been impossible to trace the original owners and share the land amongst so many descendants. Yet, in Luke 4 when Jesus, reading from Isaiah, 'proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord' - many scholars believe he is referring to the Jubilee.

Neither Isaiah nor Jesus were calling for the literal implementation of the rules found in Leviticus 25. Instead, they were using an image from their holy books that summed up the concept of structural justice - forgiving debts and sharing property amongst everyone.

We see how Christians in the early church did this amongst themselves, by selling property or sharing their houses. We might think about how it relates to our own life as a church.

It is also part of our message of hope for the wider world. Perhaps we can support global efforts at achieving justice for third-world countries like the Make Poverty History campaign. At a local level, we might find ways to tackle economic injustice in our neighbourhood.

The gospel transforms the role of the banker and every other 'vocation'

Yoder finishes the chapter with a detour that is important to understanding Christian social ethics. This is the idea that the Gospel transforms even our jobs.

Some Christian theology teaches that our society and its institutions are God given just how they are - they are the 'order-of-creation'. According to this thinking, the way things are is the way God wants them to be. Christians are called to a particular vocation or role and should do it with honesty and hard work without challenging it.

The example most relevant to the Lord's Supper is banking. According to the 'order-of-creation', a Christian banker's role is to make lots of money, not share it like Jesus told us to.

Other examples: soldiers and hangmen should kill, because that is their role in the world. Slaves should remain slaves; women should remain submissive; employees should always obey their bosses.

What is Yoder's response? The order-of-creation has been so corrupted by sin that in many ways it no longer reflects God's desire. Our Christian calling is to follow Jesus. This will bring us into conflict with the way things are. We are to plant signs of the new world - the kingdom - in the ruins of the old world.

The Christian banker will try to find realistic ways to put in practice the Jubilee. There are people doing this. The Christian real-estate agent will find ways to house people according to need. There are people doing this. The Christian judge will open the court to conflict resolution procedures and try to stop the trend toward more suing. There are people doing this.

Discussion questions

1. What importance does eating together have in your life? Think about family meals, as well as dinner guests and Christmas meals. Is there something special about sharing food with others in your church?
2. Many Christians find that inviting others from church home to eat with them is an important part of fellowship, even though they don't associate it with the Lord's Supper.
3. Try summing up what Yoder is saying in this chapter. (Don't evaluate it yet; just sum it up.)
4. Are you convinced that Jesus meant the Lord's Supper to be a real meal?
5. How could your church implement a shared meal as part of the Sunday worship meeting? What practical and theological issues would it raise?
6. What are some of the ways your church could approach the wider sharing of money and time that the Lord's Supper involves?
7. How does this view of the Lord's Supper speak to the world outside the church?

Chapter three - Baptism and the new humanity

Baptism is entry into a new people

Baptism has a social meaning that has been lost by most Christians. It celebrates a person's entry into a new people – the church. This new people is a tie stronger than race, ethnicity or family. Different types of people who were once hostile to each other are brought into the same family.

Bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the writings of Paul

...with us therefore worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of anyone; even if once they counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so now no longer. If anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:16-17)

One of Paul's missionary policies was to make Jews and Gentiles members of the same church, eating and worshipping together. Both sides criticised this policy. In 2 Corinthians, Paul responds by writing the verses above.

The New English Bible translates 'new world' where a lot of translations translate 'he is a new creature'. In *Politics of Jesus* (pp. 221-223, 2nd edition), Yoder makes a strong argument that 'new world' or 'new creation' is the much more accurate translation. Not just the individual changes - there is a whole new world.

The 'worldly standards' which cease to count are more precisely 'ethnicity' (Greek: 'according to the flesh'.) The old divisions of race, class and ability are no longer important, because when we are united to Christ, we belong to a new people where these divisions are overcome.

In Galatians 3:27-28, Paul writes:

Baptized in Christ, you are clothed in Christ, and there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Yoder's translation)

In Ephesians 2:14-15, Paul writes:

He is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one; and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace. (Yoder's translation)

In all three epistles, using different words, Paul makes the same point - Christ has broken down the divisions between people. There is a new creation and we enter it through baptism. Baptism celebrates the merging of the Jewish and Gentile stories. In the baptism ritual, one of the expressions like 'new humanity', 'peace' or 'new creation' would have been used. The ritual would highlight the contrast between believers' old identity as part of an ethnic group and their new identity in Christ.

Jesus and John the Baptist

The idea didn't start with Paul. John the Baptist was probably challenged by the authorities for baptising everyone who came to him in repentance – unclean Jews (tax collectors), perhaps even Gentiles. He responded by saying that God makes daughters and sons of Abraham by faith (Matthew 3:5-10). Baptism gives all people the same new start.

Jesus said the same thing in John 8, and Paul in Galatians 3. You don't have to be born a Jew to be a descendent of Abraham. Now, anyone can become a descendent of Abraham by believing in Christ.

Baptism inducts people into a new society – the church. This new society is a model for the rest of the world to follow. Unfortunately, through history the church has often failed to be the new society.

Baptism in church history

Later Christian theology turned baptism into something very different. After the fifth century, there were no more outsiders to convert because the known world had been declared Christian by the emperor. Baptism became a celebration of your birth into a particular country and ethnic group – the opposite of its original meaning, when it was a transcending of your nationality and race in a new people.

It was natural that a new theology developed to explain what the ritual of baptism does to a baby who receives it without asking for it. This new theology borrowed from the non-Christian philosophical idea of 'original sin' - that being born into a human body was sinful in itself. The baptism ritual became a way to wash away the original sin. In this understanding, there was no breaking down the barriers between classes of people and no new age breaking in.

In reaction, the Reformer, Zwingli, turned baptism into an acted-message. It was an outward symbol of an inner new birth. This meant babies couldn't be baptised; but it did not involve egalitarianism or a new social reality. Today, many Baptists hold this view.

Importance for the world

The oneness and equality of humanity is a message which applies beyond the church to the whole world. The world has its own versions of this message that are different to the Christian one we have been describing.

The United States Constitution proclaims, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.' It's a nice sentiment, but it isn't true. 'Self-evident' means that people already agree on something without needing to be convinced. That is not the case about the equality of all humans. Most people do not really believe it.

Yoder believes we shouldn't look to the order-of-creation to find equality, but to Jesus Christ and redemption.

The church should be announcing to the world that we believe in the equality of all humans, and that they can come together as one people. The problem is that it seems like we are tagging along behind the world, using words of our own to say something the world taught us needed saying.

This problem occurs because for too many centuries, the church lost the message of oneness that originated with Jesus. Instead, from the time Christianity became a state religion up until a century ago, 'Christian' authorities claimed by the order-of-creation that peoples, nations and classes should stay apart and that men should rule over women, and that white people should rule the globe. The mainline church did not live up to its own message or even realise its own message.

We can only try to make it clear that our vision comes out of the New Testament, and out of what God intends the church to be, and that it is older and more deeply rooted

Current debates about baptism and mission

What we believe about baptism has a big impact on our view of mission – that is, the work of the church.

Here are three ways of thinking about baptism and mission:

1. ***Conservative evangelicals*** - The work of the church is to bring individuals, one at a time, to respond to information about Jesus and ask him into their hearts. The 'new creature' will be freed from sins, including racism. The evangelicals who hold this view believe that the social reality of the church is necessary, but it is not the message itself. The social grouping of the church is simply a result of individuals being converted and meeting together.

To this, Yoder would say that the social reality of the church comes first; it is the sign of the messianic age. There is more than just individuals freed from racism; there is a new people who show that different races can be one people.

2. ***Liberals*** – The work of the church is to get involved with whatever justice or peace or equality movements are happening in the world. The church isn't distinct from the world and so doctrine and conversion are irrelevant.

To this, Yoder would say the particular form of justice, peace and equality found in the New Testament is important. There is common ground on which the church can co-operate with feminists or Aboriginal land rights activists, but there are also important differences. The church itself is the new people who demonstrate the hope for the world – a people bound together in Christ. Our message of hope for the world is this church showing the oneness of all types of people

3. ***Church growth movement*** – The work of the church is to plant viable churches in every culture. The most effective way to do this is to make them monocultural. We plant a church aimed at a particular culture or even 'market' – Indonesian immigrants; Aborigines; young rich singles; working class families. The church does not show the overcoming of divisions; it retains them.

To this, Yoder would say that a crucial part of the gospel is that different types of people are brought together into fellowship. It is easier to stick to our own kind of people, but it's not the full gospel.

According to Yoder, Paul's understanding is different to all three of these ways of thinking. The messianic age has begun; Paul simply proclaims it. What he and his readers are to do is announce and celebrate it. Because it has begun, status differences – whether sexual, ritual, ethnic or economic – are overarched in a new reality. The truth of this announcement will echo with some listeners who will join in the celebration, but the truth is not dependent on the echo. The proclaimed truth will have effects, making cultural waves, making history happen, both within the believing community and beyond, but its truth does not depend on these effects. When heard, the message will change people both inwardly and outwardly, but that change is not the message. The message is that Christ has begun a new phase of world history. There is now a group of people who are a 'new world' or a 'new humanity'. We know the new world has come because it breaches the old divides.

So we don't have to choose between evangelism and social justice. The Gospel *is* that the old divides are overcome, a new people are brought together in Christ. Baptism proclaims it. We are to constantly tell people the good news (evangelise) that there is a new world (social justice).

Baptism also means repentance

So far, we have been discussing baptism's message of bringing together different ethnic groups. But baptism also has other political meanings. Even before Jesus, it meant repentance and cleaning – it meant 'You can leave your past behind; you can change!'

Does this message have meaning for the world?

It certainly speaks against social sciences which say that offenders can't change, that criminals are stuck in being a product of social and psychological forces. We hold out hope for everyone to change – even our enemies. And this leads us to be non-violent. It is our hope that our enemies (which the world tells us to kill) will one day be our brothers and sisters in the new creation.

A common pattern begins to emerge

We've now looked at three practices of the early church and their contributions to mission and politics. We can begin to see a pattern emerging.

1. For all three, the New Testament says that when humans do it, God is doing it. (The theological word for this is 'sacrament', but that is a word loaded with the wrong meanings.)
2. All three are ordinary human behaviour – reconciling through dialogue, sharing bread with one another, different races sharing community. They are not mysterious or esoteric like later Christian theology made them. Because they are ordinary human behaviour, all three can make sense to the world.

3. The New Testament describes all three as coming from the work of Jesus. Binding and loosing and breaking bread are direct commands from Jesus. Baptism celebrates the new world brought about by the cross and resurrection.
4. All three start with a social meaning. In the introduction, we were talking about the gap between worship and everyday life. These practices have no such gap. They are social, practical and public. They can be prototypes for what others can do in the wider world. Beyond the church, it is possible to resolve conflicts and make decisions by conversation, to feed the hungry, and to build interethnic community by inclusion. So the practices are political in two senses. Firstly, they are practiced by a church with a particular social shape. And secondly, they can be used by any society as a way to organise life together.
5. All three are procedural guidelines. They give us the skills to resolve moral questions, rather than giving us precise moral answers. This means that they are not bound to their original cultural setting; they are skills we can apply to new cultural settings to learn how to follow Christ in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Discussion questions

1. What does baptism mean to you?
2. Try summing up what Yoder is saying in this chapter. (Don't evaluate it yet; just sum it up.)
3. Do you agree with him?
4. Are you convinced that Paul believed all members of the body were gifted and that there be no more religious specialists?
5. What would a church which practiced 'every member empowerment' be like today?
6. What implications does this practice have for your church?

Chapter four - The fullness of Christ

Everyone has a gift for the church

The Holy Spirit has poured out gifts on each member of the church. We miss the importance of this in most churches; we give all the jobs to the super-pastor and sit passively in the pews. But the fact that everyone has a gift is radical and powerful. It means the end of the religious specialist in Christian churches. It means a church where everyone contributes, where everyone is part of a body: an interdependent unity.

New group dynamics

His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers... for building up the body of Christ... until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13, RSV)

When Paul uses the term 'the fullness of Christ' in Ephesians 4:13, he's talking about the new group dynamics found in the church. The new dynamics are that God has given every member a special gift to use, a role to play in building up the church. (By building up the church, I mean encouraging and strengthening the people in the church.)

It's a point Paul makes in other places, too, including:

- In 1 Corinthians 12:7, he states specifically that 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.'
- In Romans 12, Paul talks about the body having many parts with different gifts, and each person is to use their gifts according to the measure they've been given. When he writes 'according to the measure of faith God has assigned' (12:3), he does not mean that some people have been dealt out a lot of faith or grace and some only a little. 'Measure' is not like a 'measuring cup', but more like a serving, or a portion.

The same way of speaking also appears in 1 Peter 4:9-11. This shows that it wasn't just Paul's idea; it was held by other Christian communities as well. Paul is the one, however, who spells it out most fully for us.

Every member empowerment was a very different pattern to the existing ones of Paul's world, and it is also very different to the patterns we find in our world, including our churches. We need to remember that what Paul was talking about is very different to the way later Christian theology has understood his key concepts, 'charisma', 'ministry' and 'body'.

Today, there are differences between different denominations on the pattern of roles in the church, but there is a basic dominant assumption that in each church, just one or two or three people have the special role of 'minister'. Only especially qualified person can do the special thing that makes the church what it is supposed to be.

Part of the victory of Christ

In Ephesians 4, Paul says that the giving out of gifts to every believer is a part of the victory of Christ. It is something very new and unnatural. It is a case of living up to a new direction we have been shown.

Today, Christians miss the newness of the multiplicity of gifts because they assume they already understand it. They think it is the same as business models of teamwork that they see in the world. In contrast, Paul says that it has never existed before and it had to be achieved by Christ; it is part of the victory procession of Christ sharing with his people the spoils of his victory.

Body-thinking: not the same as individualism

In our society, the individual is very important. This individualism is not all bad. It may partly owe its origins to the idea that each member of the body is individually gifted. But while we can recognise a similarity, it's more important to emphasise the differences between the gospel's every member empowerment and the world's individualism.

The image Paul uses for us is as hands or eyes or feet of a body. Each of these parts is unique and irreplaceable but not independent – a hand can't function on its own. Its role and usefulness only makes sense in the context of the body as a whole.

The idea extends outside the church to every group of humans. Humans are less than they are meant to be when they are not part of a body in organic interdependence with others. We become what we were created to be when we are a part of a body – in its fullest sense, in the church; but also as part of a team on the sporting field or in the office.

Keeping the body together

It will help us better understand Paul's vision if we consider the situation he was responding to at Corinth.

Some of the Christians in the Corinth church believed their ministry was more 'spiritual' than that of other members. Paul does not deny that their ministries are driven by the Spirit, but he makes three key points:

1. *Every* member of the body has been given some gift by the Holy Spirit and all of the gifts are of equal dignity. Thus each member is called to recognise everyone else's gift, giving special honour to people with the less glamorous gifts.
2. In the church meeting, there are two important principles: (i) orderliness is important and (ii) prophecy - the speaking of God's Word for the present - takes priority over the other gifts (this is the Rule of Paul, the subject of the next chapter).

3. It seems that some Corinthians were calling themselves 'spiritual' and claimed to possess the Holy Spirit more fully than the others. Paul responded by replacing their word *spiritual* with *gift* (*charisma*, from which we get charismatic). It was not that some possessed the Spirit and some did not, but that all roles were gifts given by the Spirit. Since they were a gift, they were not a reason to be proud.

Basically, Paul was trying to correct the chaotic enthusiasm in the church that was causing disorder. For the Corinthians, wild displays of tongues were overvalued.

Soon, however, a different role was overvalued - a role that wasn't even present in the churches Paul wrote to. This role combined teaching, eldership, prophecy and pastoral support into something called 'priest' or 'minister'. One person in each church was suddenly given a virtual monopoly on gifts!

Paul's message to us: recapture the Spirit-empowered church!

What is Paul's message to the church since his time, a church where the priest is usually dominant and the lay-people are passively sitting in the pews? We don't need to be corrected for chaotic enthusiasm! We need to recapture his idea of the Spirit-empowered church which caused the chaos in the first place! Paul first said, 'Everyone has a gift'; then he said, 'Let everything be orderly.' The Corinthians needed to hear the second truth; we need to hear the first one. The idea that everyone has a gift means changing the way we do things, changing the way we have institutionalised roles and restricted gifts to the few. When we look at church history, we see that Bible-centred renewal movements have recaptured that first truth, at least for a while. This is discussed further below.

The words 'charisma' and 'gift' are crucial to this new pattern of ministry. But the problem is that the way we use these words today confuses us and takes us away from what Paul meant. There are three confusing uses of these words:

1. We use the word 'charismatic' to describe a powerful, charming leader. 'Charisma' is a kind of charm that only a few people have. This is opposite to how Paul used the word 'charisma'. He was trying to downplay the uniqueness of 'charisms' - it is not something to be proud of, but a gift from God.
2. We use the word 'charismatic' to describe a particular type of Christianity. Some churches are 'charismatic' and some are not. Again, this is the opposite of what Paul meant; he meant that all Christians and all churches were 'charismatic' - were given gifts and used them.
3. We use the word 'gifted' to describe someone with special natural ability. But Paul only talked about people being 'gifted' in the setting of the church. Gifts are something given to Christians to build up the church. Let's not confuse the gifts of the New Testament with its current secular use.

We also think of bodies - committees, organisations, churches - in a way different to Paul. We call the boss of a body the 'head', and so we imply that there is an order of importance, a hierarchy. Paul's metaphor of the body has Christ as the head; all the rest of us are of equal importance.

The apostles knew Jesus and so had a special place in the church, but they died out. Prophets were valued but they were still under the authority of the church. There were also lots of members of the body giving prophecies. The role of elders was another important one, and they had some authority in the early churches. But there seems to have been a number of elders in each small church, a team of them. At every point, the vision points away from concentrating power in the hands of one or two.

In our time, Paul's call for role diversity is not so unusual - we hear the same call from other people for other reasons. What we need to be clear on is what Paul meant by it. It is not because he believes in democracy. It is not because he is an anarchist suspicious of all authority.

Instead, Paul proclaims that in the midst of a fallen world, the grace of God has given each believer, without merit, a special gift and a special place in a body of people. God has not made everyone the same, but has empowered each member differently yet equally. He has restored everyone to what they are meant to be - a part of a body; in doing this, they are doing what God intended for humans.

The powerful alternative

Paul's message goes against our instincts and against our traditions. Religions from all cultures and societies tend to put access to God in the hands of one special priest or shaman or minister. This role is a profession for a specialist. There is usually a special ceremony that only the priest can perform.

The specialisation of religion is a sign of the fallen nature of the world. But God has been at work throughout history reversing this fallenness.

Already in Ancient Israel, God was acting to de-centralise the priestly specialist. Abraham was not a priest; he took his sacrifice to Melchizedek. Moses was not a priest; he let his brother, Aaron, and then the Levites do those rituals. In Numbers 11, at God's instruction, Moses calls seventy men to share the Holy Spirit's empowerment with him. When these men become ecstatic, Joshua asks Moses to stop them. Moses replies, 'I wish that the LORD would give his spirit to all his people and make all of them shout like prophets!' (11:29 - Good News Bible).

When the Jews were sent into exile and no longer had a temple, Judaism survived by replacing priests with rabbis. Synagogues were formed of any ten households, with no religious specialist needed in their midst at all. (In modern Judaism, 'rabbi' is an ordained position. It wasn't so in the time of the New Testament; it was simply a title of respect for a learned layperson.)

By the time of Jesus, the temple and its priesthood had been restored. Jesus relativised it again. He formed a movement out of fishermen, zealots, publicans and women and sent seventy of them (the same number as Moses) out across the countryside. This set the stage for the churches Paul was writing to, where everyone had a special gift and role. Since Pentecost, when the Spirit fell on all God's people, priests have been out of work - they no longer have special access to God.

Sometimes the early Christians said they were all priests; sometimes they said that the priesthood was done away with. The meaning is actually the same. All members of the body are Spirit-empowered. There is no longer a monopoly on access to God. Yet since then, it's one of the parts of the Gospel message which has been least understood and least practiced.

Soon Paul's vision was lost. There was no central authority in the early church, so perhaps it never won out in the first place. When Christianity became allied with the state in the fourth century, the ideas of king and priest reinforced each other.

Over the centuries since, renewal movements have begun to recover Paul's vision by giving power and roles to everyone. However, it rarely lasts long and it is rarely thought through as part of the renewal project. The Quakers, the Plymouth Brethren and the Salvation Army have come closer than most Protestants to relativising the priestly monopoly and validating varied gifts. Yet they did not set out to put in place what Paul wrote about. Instead, as they were being led by the Spirit they found God empowering non-clergy, including women, and they honoured these gifts.

Importance for the world

Paul's vision of working together, of complementary functions, is helpful for any organisation doing things. The modern idea of teamwork is a spin-off from Paul's concept. Factories and businesses where every worker is involved in policy making and quality control make better cars or sell more software than those whose structure is hierarchical.

Our theme in its context

We have now looked at four practices commanded, and to some degree, practiced in the early churches. Unlike the others, the multiplicity of gifts is not usually called 'worship'. It should be!

Like the other three so far, this practice has been distorted, if it has been practiced at all. Binding and loosing was distorted into the 'sacrament of penance', where a religious specialist forgives the church members for their sins. The responsibility of every believer to disciple their brothers and sisters was lost. It's a similar story with every member empowerment - the role of every member was replaced with the role of a few religious specialists.

The reformation that has yet to happen

According to Yoder, every member empowerment is the first of the five practices that has not yet had its reformation. Its practical form still has to be worked out and practiced.

This should remind us that the New Testament hasn't been exhausted. It reminds that there's not just one right model of reformation that will always be the same. There is no finished pattern; it's not as simple as restoring a biblical church. It has to be worked out newly in each new context. It has to transform the existing structures.

Yoder wrote this book in the early 1990s; in the years since then, the house church movement has grown rapidly. Perhaps he would have regarded house churches as the movement which would carry out this reformation. Many house churches are

formed with the deliberate intention of starting a church where everyone can participate. Even when this isn't a conscious intention, house churches lend themselves to everybody participating because they are small and they don't usually pay a minister.

So, 'every member empowerment' is a reformation that is potentially sweeping across the globe like previous reformations. But the issue that is getting the most attention in denominations is debate about women in ministry.

The debate goes like this: taking for granted that there is one role called 'ministry', churches then either deny or allow women to fill this role.

From Paul's vision, the mistake which dominates this debate is not in the answers but in the question. There should not be one 'ministerial' role, of which we can then argue about whether it is gender-specific. There are as many ministerial roles as there are members of the body of Christ, and so half of them belong to women.

The roles least justified by the New Testament are those of priest and bishop over multiple congregations. It is these ones that men alone have traditionally held and want to keep women out of. To let a few women into a role 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. It's like trying to say that Margaret Thatcher changed the nature of politics.

The transformation that Paul's vision calls for would not be to let a few gifted women share with a few men the rare roles of domination. It would be to change the idea of ministry so that every person is gifted, every person is called, every person is empowered and no-one is dominated. Only that would live up to Paul's call to 'lead a life worthy of our calling.'

Discussion questions

1. How have gifts and roles been recognised in your own church experience?
2. Has the pastor or priest been the religious specialist?
3. Try summing up what Yoder is saying in this chapter. (Don't evaluate it yet; just sum it up.)
4. Are you convinced that Paul believed all members of the body were gifted and that there be no more religious specialists?
5. What would a church which practiced every member empowerment be like today?
6. What implications does this practice have for your church?

Chapter 5 - The Rule of Paul

The open meeting

The Rule of Paul is Saint Paul's instruction to stop a worship meeting and listen to whoever has a message from God. He believed that *anyone* could receive that message, and that everyone else should listen and weigh it up. More than that, it is the principle of an open meeting - worship services based on a conversation which includes all members. And not just worship meetings – it applies to business meetings too. It is the idea that the process of dialogue is essential in reaching the right decision.

A couple of examples of the Rule of Paul

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be encouraged.

1 Corinthians 14:29-31 (NRSV)

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul tells the Corinthians how they should behave when they are gathered for worship. In v. 30, he says that when someone receives a message from God - a prophecy - whoever was speaking should stop and let the person with the message speak. Everyone else should then weigh up what the person says and decide whether it is from God. The message from God could come to anyone in the congregation. It is an open meeting - everyone is allowed to speak.

The same idea about the nature of the church meeting can be seen in Acts 15, where the early church meets to work out the relations between Jews and Gentiles in the new churches. The procedure was simple. Paul and Barnabas reported on their way Gentiles had been joining the movement. Some Jerusalem believers objected that the Gentiles had not followed the rules for entering Judaism. The apostle Peter reminded the community of the Cornelius story. This silenced the objectors. Paul and Barnabas continued their story. When no-one else had more to say, James, the senior elder, proposed a mediating conclusion, of which he could say that it had 'seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (v. 28).

The rule of Paul in church history

In the early centuries, the churches sent representatives to 'synods' or 'councils' to decide controversial issues. They were meant to work like the Jerusalem Council, but were bigger and more formal and so had less and less of the spontaneity and openness of the Jerusalem Council. By the Middle Ages, some Christians thought that if only a truly representative council could be called together of all the churches, then God would speak again.

The Reformers had a similar hope for a representative council, and Luther and Zwingli both thought, in different ways, that all believers should have a right to speak. Yet they saw it as an ideal, which could not be put into practice in their present

time. In 1533, some Swiss Brethren - an Anabaptist group - produced a pamphlet called 'Answer of some who are called Anabaptists, why they do not attend churches'. Their first reason for not attending (the official) churches is that these churches did not follow the 'Christian order' found in 1 Cor 14 - 'that a listener is bound in Christian love (if something to edification is given or revealed to him) that he should and may speak of it also in the congregation.'

God's will is known by the Spirit working in the meeting

Reading 1 Cor 14, the early Protestants came separately to the same conclusion - God makes his will known by open conversation in the Christian meeting. There is no voting in which a majority overrules a minority. There is no decision made by a leader. Instead, a consensus arises, everyone ends up feeling they are being led in the same direction.

This idea came out again in the British Reformation, among Seekers, Levellers, Ranters, Friends and radical Baptists. Some historians think it influenced British democracy. But of these groups, the first three folded and the Baptists retained a pastor-centred approach. It was the Friends - the Quakers - who developed and practiced the idea that the Spirit of Christ is present in all members to shape and guide the church.

Quaker silence is not mystical and it is not silent worship. It is a time of expectant waiting until someone - and the point is that it can be anyone - is moved to speak. Consensus is reached when everyone has had a chance to say all they are led to say and there is no further disagreement.

This is the process for both church 'worship' and 'business' meetings. Allowing dialogue in a worship meeting makes it feel a bit more like a business meeting; it often makes it more practical. On the other hand, seeing the open meeting as worshipful in itself means that business meetings become another form of worship.

The Quakers believe that the Word is at work in everyone (John 1:9), giving them the capacity to hear God. It means that the principle of open dialogue works beyond the church as well, even if there isn't the same common goal and the same special presence of the Holy Spirit. One of the ways Jesus is at work healing people in the world is the idea from his ministry that we listen not only to our neighbours, but also to our enemies. Gandhi says we should renounce violence not only because it is wrong; but also because the enemy helps us find the truth. We need to act non-violently so that our enemy will listen to us; and also, we need to hear our enemy.

The spectre of anarchy

But surely we can't let just anyone speak out at our church worship services? Surely we don't have the time to get consensus on every important decision? Won't we have chaotic diversity?

It's a mistake to think that imposing decisions on people creates unity and that letting them speak creates diversity. The diversity is always there; it's just that we usually try to silence it. A decree is quicker than careful listening, but is often wrong. A quick majority vote may reach a decision rapidly, but it doesn't resolve the problem. The minority who were outvoted remain unconvinced.

If the truth is only found when every member of the church contributes, then we need to make sure we have the time and patience to discover it.

Discussion questions

1. In a meeting or conversation, have you experienced truth emerging through everyone's contribution?
2. Try summing up what Yoder is saying in this chapter. (Don't evaluate yet; just sum it up.)
3. Are you convinced that this is what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 14?
4. How could your church implement an open meeting? What practical and theological issues would it raise?

6 - Conclusion

Now we have looked at five sample practices of the church, we can try to see patterns and make some generalisations.

Generalisations for the church's life

All five practices are worship, are ministry, are praise, are celebratory and are essential to the church. 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.

Generalisations for the church's relation to the world

Yoder asks what general lessons he has learnt concerning the question with which the study began – how the gospel affects the rest of the world.

1. **Which is the 'real world'?** Too often Christians make the mistake of thinking there is an agreed reality – a 'real world' – which the church has to fit into. Instead, we should believe that we have our own understanding of reality, just as unbelieving people have their own understanding of reality. That means we can afford to begin with the gospel itself and then work out from there, as this study has done, rather than beginning with someone else's definition of 'the nature of things' and then trying to place the call of God within it.
2. **Respect the world's unbelief.** It's not possible to Christianise the world with all its non-Christian structures. The way the world is structured, it would be impossible to rule it according to the gospel. The answer is not to find another way to rule it; the answer is to realise that we are called to serve the world, not to rule it.
3. **Common agenda.** There is, however, hope of affecting the world for the better, which our five practices all show. We affect the world by doing ordinary social things differently for Jesus' sake. We are one family with people from many cultures; we share our bread; we forgive one another. These activities can be observed and copied by non-Christians.
4. **Good news to the world.** All five practices can be called together 'good news'. 'News' because they say something people wouldn't know if they weren't told. 'Good' because it is helpful, saving and healing to those who accept it. By definition, news is public; it is proclaimed in the open; we proclaim the good news when we do these five practices.
5. **As a body.** The focus of these practices is not the individual but a believing community. They give a lot of dignity to individuals, but the individual is not the focus.
6. **Refuse nationalism, violence and lordship.** All five practices are those of a church which serves, rather than rules. They come out of Jesus choosing servanthood instead of power. Baptism into a new humanity means rejecting nationalism and war, because we are brothers and sisters with people from all nations. The sharing of food and goods also speaks against war, because most of the time war is about wanting economic control.

7. **Example for the world.** These practices are not ritualistic or 'religious' in the normal sense. Non-Christians can understand them and learn from them. Binding and loosing can provide models for conflict resolution. Sharing bread is a model not only for soup kitchens but also for non-Christians to think about welfare in general. 'Every member has a gift' is an alternative to vertical business models of management in business. Dialogue under the Holy Spirit (the rule of Paul) is an idea that shows how democracy could potentially work.

The believing body of Christ is the part of the world already renewed. It is the instrument of the renewal of the rest of the world to the extent to which it manages to live out the gospel.

Sometimes the body of Christ will have to stand against the world and its rebellion against God. Sometimes the body of Christ will be called to be working with the world when the world is working toward something God wants.

Is this a pattern?

Each of these practices fulfils and extends themes from the Old Testament. The New Testament expresses them simply. In the time since the New Testament, the practices have been distorted or forgotten and then, at key times, resurfaced. Each practice can reach beyond the church into the world, giving shape to our general human hope.

Yoder suggests that this might be the pattern of God's saving purposes. God's purpose for the world can be seen in history, in the social existence of his people. We return again and again – sometimes by accident; often by prayer and by rediscovering Jesus in the Bible – to the pattern of life God ultimately wants the whole world to live.

Discussion questions

The challenge of this book is putting it into practice. You might have begun to see some options as you discussed each chapter. Discuss the best options for you; it might be one of the ones below, or another that you can add.

- Try to reform a conventional church – eg introducing a common meal as the culmination of a Sunday meeting (many churches have a church luncheon for special occasions; maybe this could be made much more regular.)
- Introduce these practices to a small group within a conventional church. It is a difficult task to make a church of two hundred an open meeting; but if there is a midweek small group or Bible study, why can't it reflect all these practices? It would, of course, become a real church in its own right, but this might scare some people, so you can avoid this label, at least at the start.
- Plant a church with these practices at its core. Churches which have at their core agreed practices rather than agreed doctrine are more likely to work. You probably only need two families who want to live out these five practices and you can start a house church. (You will need to be missionary minded, reaching out for new people to join you.)
- Consider secular applications. (This should be used in combination of one of the above church options.) Can you introduce a form of the open meeting at work? The shared meal? Yoder is convinced that each of these practices have application in the secular world; however, the task is surely more difficult when we do not have a group of people committed to Jesus who set out the practices.