

Revisiting John Howard Yoder for Modern Contextual Political Theology

현대 정치신학을 위한 존 하워드 요더의 재조명

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Why Yoder?

John Howard Yoder was obviously one of the most prominent political theologians in the twentieth century. As well known, he was a pacifist who was Mennonite with an Anabaptist perspective. Indeed, his pacifistic approach to politics was really influential in the realm of modern politics. Before and after his death on December 30, 1997, there have been abundant discussions and reflections upon his political theology. Throughout the Iraq War (20 March, 2003 – 18 December, 2011) in the early twenty-first century, however, his pacifism seemed to become less influential in the world in which just war theory was relatively pervasive. Needless to say, his pacifism was, is, and will be still meaningful and influential regardless of any changes of political situations in the world. It is because his pacifism is proved to be unique, profound and radical whenever its political insight is discovered.

The prime task of this article is to discover this political insight of Yoder in a productive direction. Overall, his methodology of biblical approach to politics is unique; his nonviolent political stance is profound; his main political themes are radical. To revisit his political theology and discover these insights is by itself apparently meaningful. The second task of this article is to attempt to cast these insights into the discourse of modern political theology. What can Yoder's politics provide for the current political theology? Or, what can his political theology impose on modern contextual political theology? To answer the question is the final goal as well as the second task of this article. What are answered in this process are three: an awakening of his biblical approach, his pacifistic reinterpretation of violent history, and his pursuit of cross as alternative. What this article ultimately anticipates is that these three points would become three contributions of Yoder's political theology to the modern contextual political theology in the twenty-first century.

Methodology: Biblical Approach to Politics

John Howard Yoder's approach to political issues is *biblical*. As a methodology of political discourse, he chooses a biblical approach. In his masterpiece, *The Politics of Jesus*, which shows his basic political concern and stance, he elaborates his political discourse according to biblical verses and biblical insights. In this book, "Yoder probes major biblical texts in order to fathom the political witness of Jesus."¹ His biblical approach to politics starts from the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Luke. In the beginning of the book, he says, "Our study, then, seeks to describe the connection which might relate New Testament studies with contemporary social ethics."²

From the New Testament, Yoder proclaims that Jesus is not the norm. For Yoder, the "nature of Jesus' message was ahistorical by definition. He[Jesus] dealt with spiritual and not social matters, with the existential and not the concrete."³ Yoder denounces the stance that Jesus tried to suggest a new and concrete social order toward the world. He criticizes that this stance leads to consider Jesus as a transcendent norm, indifferent to the political issues at that time. Instead, Yoder points out that Jesus' radical message and ministry naturally had a political character in these social situations. For example, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the Good News was political.⁴ Yoder states that the "language 'kingdom,' 'evangel,' is chosen from the political realm."⁵

In this case, Yoder has no intention to confine his political concern within a biblical discourse. Rather, he takes out these biblically political concepts from the Bible and seeks to apply them to our daily life. His accent on 'jubilee year' is one example of this. For Yoder, the climax of Jesus' radical politics in Luke is the practice of the jubilee, i.e., "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Here, Yoder emphasizes not only the jubilee in the Bible, but also the jubilee in our daily life. In this sense, he suggests that believers' daily prayer, the Lord's prayer is "a jubilary prayer."⁶

¹ Kenneth L. Vaux, *Ethics and the War on Terrorism* (Eugene: WIPF and Stock, 2002), 52 (Recited from Dong Hwan Kim, "Politics in the Bible," *University and Mission* 22 (2012), 77).

² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ It is in contrast to a Troeltschian socio-religious perspective based on the assumption that Jesus' message was fundamentally religious and not political (Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 1, trans. Oliver Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), 46-51).

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

Political Stances

Nonviolent Pacifism with Anti-Constantinianism

Yoder's political stance is obviously pacifistic. Particularly, the politics of Jesus was, for Yoder, is neither coercive nor dominant. In *For the Nations*, Yoder mentions that Jesus had four choices toward the world in his age. The first choice is the realism of the Herodians and Sadducees, the second is the revolutionary violence of Zealots, the third is the monastic withdrawal of the Amish, and the fourth is the proper religious practice of the Pharisees.⁷ For Yoder, Jesus did not choose any of them. Yoder especially emphasizes that Jesus' position was opposite to the Zealots' revolutionary violence because Jesus' methodology toward the social and political power was nonviolent. Following this politics of Jesus, Yoder's political ethic is directed toward a nonviolent pacifism.

Likewise, Yoder finds the foundation of his nonviolent pacifistic position in the works of Jesus. For Yoder, Jesus' stance toward the world was certainly radical even in his nonviolent attitude. However, it does not mean that it was dominant or coercive. To be sure, Jesus had no intention to compromise with the worldly power that was in itself coercive and dominant. According to Yoder, unfortunately, this radical and nonviolent character of Jesus came to be weakened by the early church. He claims that Jesus' timeless radicality toward the world was changed into the coercive dominance by the early church. In this sense, it is hard for the apostles who were the leaders of the early church to be free from Yoder's critique. He argues, "I was especially concerned ... that the ethic of the apostles betrays that of Jesus."⁸

In this critical view, Yoder is opposed to the Pauline ethics. Paul is, for Yoder, described as the "great Hellenizer" or "Judaizer"⁹ who distorted the pure teachings of Jesus in a Hellenistic religious paradigm. He seems to understand Paul as the pioneer of the subordination to the social order. For example, Yoder speaks of the misunderstanding of Romans 13. He says, "we are reminded that Romans 13 was written about pagan government. It constitutes at best acquiescence in that government's dominion, not the accrediting of a given state by God or the installation of a particular sovereign by providential disposition."¹⁰ Unfortunately, this Pauline

⁷ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 169-174.

⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 187.

⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2008), 93.

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 195.

worldly subordination became the “rule of Paul in the early Christian centuries.”¹¹ Unlike the Pauline subordination, Yoder suggests the ‘revolutionary subordination.’ While the direction of the Pauline subordination is toward the social and political power, that of the revolutionary subordination is toward God alone; while the notion of the subordination is derived from the apostles like Paul, that of the revolutionary subordination is derived from Jesus Christ.

Yoder seeks to find the origin of the dominant political tendency in history. It was Constantinianism that was found in history by him. In *The Priestly Kingdom*, he shows how he stands over against the Constantinianism.¹² For Yoder, the Constantine in history was the original cause that contaminated the pure Christianity. He points out that Christians who had a pure radicality in the first century started to compromise with the worldly power from the period of Constantine. Under the imperial power, Christians born from Jesus’ radical messages began with speaking of other worldly alternatives instead of Jesus. In this compromising process, the originally pacifistic and nonviolent tendency of *Christianity* changed into the dominant and violent tendency of *Christianization*. Thus, Pre-Constantinian is surely separated from post-Constantinian. Yoder says that the “pre-Constantinian had been pacifists, rejecting the violence of army and empire not only because they had no share of power, but because they considered it morally wrong; the post-Constantinian Christians considered imperial violence to be not only morally tolerable but a positive good and a Christian duty.”¹³ Although Yoder does not mention the concept of evil in this book, Constantinianism is a certain kind of social and historical evil within his thought. For Yoder, social evil was shown up certainly in human history by the Constantinian event.¹⁴ For Yoder, early Christianity could not avoid the temptation of Constantinianism as a social evil.

Yoder also claims that the Reformation did not take off the Constantinian coat. Even the Reformation cannot get a good score from Yoder. He understands the Reformation under the Constantinian horizons. He reckons the Reformation as the “Constantinian fall of the church.”¹⁵

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1992), 63.

¹² In the same critical view, Stanley Hauerwas uses the word ‘Christendom’ more than Constantinianism, as the title of his book shows: *After Christendom*. In this book, he deals with the role of the church after (strictly speaking ‘against’) Christendom (Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 93-111).

¹³ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135.

¹⁴ In this regard, Yoder’s and the Augustinian understanding of evil are divided. While the Augustinian tradition understands evil as *nothing*, i.e., the privation of good, Yoder considers evil as the *existing thing*, e.g., the Constantinian in history.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

In the view of the traditional Reformation, it is indeed a sensational political stance. In a critical view of Yoder, however, the Reformation tradition is related with words such as dominance, subordination and violence. Furthermore, he points out that the flow of the contemporary Constantinianism has been continued in the relation of the present church and the world. He sees the contemporary political flow of Christianization within the Constantinian context. Especially, the effort of the church to Christianize is a modern type of Constantinianism. He cautions that this Christian dominant effort is apt to shake hands with the existing social violence. It is an example that it shook hands with the racism in the American society. Through the Constantinian tendency that made Christianity nationwide, the church became the center of African American society under a white violent power.

Radical Pacifism for Minority

In contrast to the Reformation, Yoder speaks of ‘radical Reformation.’ His concern with radical reformation is exceptional. “[Yoder’s] doctoral research and one area of graduate teaching responsibility has been the history of the ‘radical reformation’ vision of Christian renewal.”¹⁶ He asserts that radical reformers totally rejected the Constantinian position from the middle ages. He says that the “groups called “radical reformers” carried the initial reformation vision through to reject as well these indices of the post Constantinian synthesis.”¹⁷ In particular, radical reformers tried to return to the New Testament, especially Jesus, in order to restore Christianity distorted by the Constantinian. Yoder, here, focuses on the ‘humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.’ He focuses on the ministry of Jesus’ obedience through the incarnation: “The criterion of Christian ethics is not effectiveness but incarnation.”¹⁸ Yoder’s standard is only Jesus Christ himself. For Yoder, therefore, the “true ‘success’ in Christian obedience is not to be measured by changing the world in a given direction within a given length of time, but by the congruence between our path and the triumph of Christ.”¹⁹ At this point, Yoder tries to connect Jesus’ obedience with Christians’ obedience. He also considers Christians’ obedience not as an oppressed and weak condition, but as an oppressed but powerful condition. The power of Christian obedience leads Christians to identify themselves with others and enemies. If Christian obedience is not powerful but weak, it cannot be expanded to the concern toward enemies. Similarly, the church is also

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 108.

¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

powerful and not weak when it follows this obedience, keeping away from the dominant social power. Yoder says, “What can be called the ‘otherness of the church’ is an attitude rooted in strength and not in weakness. It consists in being a herald of liberation and not a community of slaves.”²⁰

In this regard, Yoder’s nonviolent stance is not dormant in action. It is, rather, active and practical with maintaining peace. Therefore, his political position against the dominant violence cannot be reduced as sectarian. Yoder is, of course, in the Mennonite tradition. However, his politics is more than the Mennonite in its pursuing direction. In the introduction of *The Priestly Kingdom*, he asserts, “As these essays should be understood as addressed to Christians in general, and not peculiarly ‘sectarian,’ so also they should be understood not as ‘radical’ in any modern sense of that term, which places a premium on the far-out and unprecedented, but rather as classical or catholic.”²¹ He also rejects a ‘territorial provincialism’ as a kind of limited sectarianism. For example, he points out that the early Christianity did not enter the world; it was already in the world. Here, he talks about the Christianity ‘in the world’ before talking about the Christianity ‘toward or against the world.’ Put differently, he speaks of a more ecumenical and more catholic vision of nonviolent pacifism. He suggests the notion of ‘unlimited catholicity.’ He says, “It is a vision of unlimited catholicity because, in contrast to both sectarian and ‘established’ views, it prescribes no particular institutional requisites for entering the movement whose shape it calls ‘restoration’.”²² It is on the basis of the notion of equality, freedom, nonviolence and noncoercion. In this case, the other expression of the unlimited Catholicism can be ‘radical Catholicism.’ For Yoder, the vision of the unlimited or radical Catholicism can overcome the limited sectarianism, the violent Constantinianism, and the dominant Reformation tradition.

In addition, for Yoder, the “church is a visible group of people relating to one another in the name of Jesus Christ.” Nowadays, it is necessary to think about the “church’s ‘servanthood’ and ‘secular’ responsibilities”²³ At this point, Yoder asks the question: “[I]s it not immoral to

²⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 148.

²¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 133. As broadly known, the church as the “servant community” was proposed well by Stanley Hauerwas. According to him, the “church is not the kingdom but the foretaste of the kingdom” when she can play the role of the servant community (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1983), 96-97).

live under an immoral social order?”²⁴ The answer is, for Yoder, unfortunately negative. Nevertheless, the negative nuisance may be changed to a positive mood if there is the moral church in the center of the immoral society. It is only possible when the church stands for the direction of obedience to the New Testament. On this basis, Yoder avers that the “*Christian church*, according to the testimony of the New Testament, accepts living under an unjust social order.”²⁵ In this sense, Yoder totally renounces the dominion of the Christian church toward social injustice. Rather, the church must proclaim the Christian gospel, which is a promise of salvation and a positive message, against structural injustices. Therefore, the “church should be not a chaplain but a conscience to society.”²⁶ In order to play this role correctly, Yoder mentions that the church needs to be the ‘free church’ which is “any ecclesiastical body which does not enjoy the institutional support of, or control by, the organs of civil government.”²⁷

Moreover, the prime reason that Constantinianism and even the Reformation could not get a good score from Yoder is because they started with and pursued the ideology or doctrine of majority. On the contrary, the political concern of Yoder is always directed toward the minority. He says, “Christian discipleship is for a minority in that it presupposes the resources of faith: the assurance of forgiveness, the counseling and accepting fellowship of the Christian brotherhood.”²⁸ Yoder asserts that his task is not to deliver a coercive majority story, but to dialogue with a noncoercive minority story in the light of the gospel. He says, “My task here is to exposit, noncoercively and dialogically, the case for claiming that that stance which has here been variously labeled as ‘peace church,’ ‘minority,’ ‘non-established,’ ‘radical reformation,’ is closer to the gospel and more properly to be recognized as the imperative under which Christians stand than are the major alternatives.”²⁹ Yoder’s concern for minority basically relates to his stance of Mennonite. It is also related to his focus on Anabaptism. He understands that minority tradition is opposed to the Reformation following the Constantinian, which is able to be critically called the “Magisterial Reformation.”³⁰ In other words, the minority tradition relates to the radical reformation tradition derived from Jesus. For Yoder, the minority vision like Anabaptism is founded in a contemporary minority flow like that of Mennonites. As “Christians

²⁴ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 191.

²⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 105.J

²⁸ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 112.

²⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 81.

³⁰ John Howard Yoder, *Theology and Mission*, ed. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 159.

in the first century were a minority in a hostile world”,³¹ the present Christians in the radical Reformation tradition is also a minority in a dominant and violent world.

Main Political Themes

The Idea of ‘God will fight for us’

As a nonviolent pacifist, Yoder speaks of *God’s order* instead of the established social order. He says, “God is not said to *create* or *institute* or *ordain* the powers that be, but only to *order* them, to put them in order, sovereignty to tell them where they belong, what is their place.”³² Yoder’s concern starts to reckon not human social and political order, but God’s order. He, therefore, emphasizes not human beings as agents, but God as the Agent. In this regard, Yoder points out that not man but God always fought for his people in the history of the Bible. For example, the Exodus is the representative event that God fought for the Israel. Yoder quotes 2 Chronicles 20:17: “You will not need to fight in this battle; Take your position, stand still. And see the victory of the LORD on your behalf.” Yoder also discovers such biblical evidence in Jesus’ ministry. Just as Israelites in the Old Testament look for God’s fighting in a battle, so patients in the New Testament look for Jesus’ healing event without their actions. In the same context, Yoder connects the Exodus led by God with the Jubilee proclaimed by Jesus. He says that the “mighty acts of God in Israel’s history had been neither the end of history, nor off the scale of human events. We have every reason to assume that the inauguration of the jubilee was understood by Jesus’ hearers with the same concreteness as the Exodus story or the deliverance of Jehoshaphat had for them.”³³

In this idea of ‘God will fight for us,’ Yoder is somewhat pessimistic to the social and political power. Human power is totally denied by him. Therefore, Reinhold Niebuhr’s optimistic position toward the worldly power is, for Yoder, obviously negative.³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is also negative even though he mentions the ‘church against the

³¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 135.

³² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 201.

³³ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁴ Yoder argues that even Reinhold Niebuhr was somehow pessimistic in understanding human sinful nature, and he was a pacifist in observing war before he was disappointed in liberal Protestant pacifism (John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 285-298).

world' in his typology.³⁵ Yoder concludes that H. Richard Niebuhr's church stands not only against the power of the world, but also with that of the world. He argues, "Richard Niebuhr never wrote his next book about the church against the world ... Similarly the later published work of John C. Bennett was not devoted to working out more fully his vision of the church as community over against the world."³⁶ For Yoder, liberal theologians such as Niebuhr brothers and Bennett overlooked the continuous message, 'God will fight for us' throughout the Bible.

Similarly, just war theory is denounced by Yoder. The just war vision is, for Yoder, one of the most dominant concepts. Therefore, he warns of the presence of this vision in contemporary political discourses. He argues that the just war concept was accepted ambiguously but properly since the Constantinian: "It[Just war tradition] is dominant without being clear. It has taken over without being tested."³⁷ He also critiques an optimism hidden in the American dream. He points out that there was "a deep optimism about the course of history" as Martin Luther King called the "American dream." "In this temporary confluence of optimisms, Christian hope served not as an opiate but as a stimulant."³⁸ Concretely, Yoder argues that the American dream represents three negative strands: the "aggressive hope for history of Puritan Protestantism, the philosophical credibility of progress as a cosmic drive, and the experience of white America's successful seizure of the continent."³⁹ Here, he is still negative to the American dream even though he suggests that a coincidence between Christian hope and the American dream is required.

Furthermore, Yoder criticizes contemporary democracy under the biblical notion of 'God will fight for us'. He warns of the Constantinianism hidden in contemporary democracy: "If on the other hand we protect ourselves from the Constantinianism of that view of democracy, we may find the realistic liberty to foster and celebrate relative democratization as one of the prophetic ministries of a servant people in a world we do not control."⁴⁰ For Yoder, democracy is in itself not negative, but the dominant direction of democracy, which is supported by

³⁵ To understand how Yoder analyses and critiques his typology, see John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 31-89. As Mennonite, particularly, Yoder points out that H. Richard Niebuhr's typology is unfair in terms that it misses representing most Mennonite groups.

³⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁸ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 126.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 166.

democratic people, is very negative.

In this negative view, however, how do we have to respond to the existing social order and power? As already mentioned in radical Reformation and radical Catholicism, Yoder's answer is not dormant in response. In other words, Yoder does not suggest a 'withdrawal' from the established social order and power. Therefore, the position of the church toward the world also cannot be a withdrawal. He says, "[I]t is thus a fundamental error to conceive of the position of the church in the New Testament in the face of social issues as a 'withdrawal,' or to see this position as motivated by the Christians' weakness."⁴¹ Yoder's political point is not a withdrawal or indifference as well as not a dominance or violence. Instead of dominance or withdrawal, his focus is always on the nonviolent pacifism according to the biblical insight.

Cross as Alternative

The climax of Yoder's political argument on Jesus is the *cross*. Through the cross, Jesus' politics in the Bible must be expanded to Christian politics. Particularly, the cross is the starting point to restore Christianity distorted by the Constantinianism. The cross is the unique Christian alternative in the socio-political realm. The only way to be free from the Constantinianism is to turn back to the event of the crucifixion. Most of all, the character of the cross is, for Yoder, nonviolent. "It is the price of one's obedience to God's love toward all people"⁴² The good news of the cross should be delivered freely, not coercively, to the world. "Because this news is only such when received as good, it can never be communicated coercively."⁴³ A violent and coercive gospel is already not good news. Here, that which the cross is nonviolent does not mean that it is impractical. The focus is on the practical event of the cross, not the speculative analysis of the cross. The story about the cross accompanies the real story in the Bible, not a theological speculation. Therefore, Yoder always speaks of the Bible prior to theology, and so, emphasizes Jesus rather than Christ. Therefore, he asserts, "our criteria must be not merely 'christological' in some vague, cosmic sense, but 'jesulogical.'"⁴⁴

It is here significant to point out that the practicality of the cross does not lead Christians to achieve a social justice by their own power. Instead, they simply participate in the 'war of the lamb.' The war of the lamb begins with God's struggle and not man's. It is connected with the

⁴¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 148.

⁴² John Howard Yoder, *He Came Preaching PEACE* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1985), 19.

⁴³ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 55.

⁴⁴ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 241.

previous biblical notion, ‘God will fight for us,’ which implies the subtitle and the last sentence of *The Politics of Jesus*: ‘*Vicit agnus noster, (eum sequamur)*.’ It means “Our Lamb has conquered; him let us follow.”⁴⁵ For Yoder, this participation also means the participation in God’s suffering with minority. For example, the “identification of Christ with the poor, the constant theme of Old and New Testament prophetic proclamation, is not understood if we see in it simply a call to upset society and make the poor rich and let the rich take their turn to suffer. The identification of God’s suffering servanthood is with men *in their suffering*.”⁴⁶

Through the concept of the cross, moreover, Yoder emphasizes Christians’ obedience not to the world, but to God alone. For Yoder, to believe is to obey or subordinate only to God. In terms of Hebrew 11:1, “to be *believing* meant acting in obedience despite the lack of evidence that obedience would ‘work’.”⁴⁷ While Yoder is basically “pessimistic about the power of this world,” “[t]he believer is fundamentally optimistic” “in the potentialities of faith” because believing is on the basis of the nonviolent obedience of the cross.⁴⁸ Here, Yoder connects Jesus’ obedience with Christians’ obedience through the cross.

As a nonviolent pacifist, Yoder claims that the cross basically stands over against social and political power. The church on the cross tradition also has the same position: “The church accepted as a gift being the ‘new humanity’ created by the cross and not by the sword.”⁴⁹ However, the cross does not mean weakness because the political radicality of Jesus is completed on the event of the cross. The dominant tendency of all worldly powers is powerless in front of the church founded on the basis of that cross as well as before the nonviolent event of the cross. Yoder says that the “powers have been defeated not by some kind of cosmic hocus-pocus but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon them is not the working of magical words nor the fulfillment of a legal contract calling for the shedding of innocent blood, but the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church which is itself a structure and a power in society.”⁵⁰ For Yoder, the image of God’s kingdom coming is also not the image of violence or oppression because the foundation of the kingdom is on the nonviolence and liberty of the cross. The messianic appearance of God’s kingdom starts with the nonviolent cross in advance of the messianic dominant power.

⁴⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 242.

⁴⁶ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 149.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

Likewise, the nonviolent cross seems to be weak, but it has a radical power for the world. For instance, the cross requests servanthood, but the servanthood through the cross does not mean a powerless subordination: “servanthood is not a position of nonpower or weakness. It is an alternative mode of power.”⁵¹ According to Yoder’s biblical perspective, Jesus had no political concern, but his ministry is very political; Jesus did not use his power and nonviolently died on the cross, but the radical power against the worldly violence was started from the cross. Indeed, the nonviolent cross practiced by Jesus and its paradoxical and radical power are, for Yoder, the only concrete political alternative that Christianity can provide and suggest.

Yoder’s Knock on Modern Political Theology

What can John Howard Yoder say to modern political theology? More concretely, what can his political theology impose on modern political theology? This short journey of revisiting Yoder is for the answer to the question. Among many reflections on Yoder’s political theology, this article intends to answer the question by pointing out three contributions of it to modern political theology.

First of all, Yoder’s biblical approach can provide modern theologians who deal with political issues with an awakening that their scholastic subjects are political, but their scholastic identity must be theological. It is a fact that some modern political theologians tend to miss their theological identity when they concentrate on political issues in their political views.⁵² In order to prevent this tendency, they need to remind themselves of keeping their theological identity and maintaining their theological viewpoints. To be sure, Yoder’s biblical approach to political issues can help them succeed in it. If their political stances begin with their biblical deliberation on politics, they can hardly miss their theological identity and theological points of view. It is because the biblical approach is, from the outset, obviously theological in methodology as well as in political stance. The biblical approach enables them to be aware that they deal with *politics as theology*, not theology as politics.

Here, it is significant to point out that Yoder’s biblical approach is not content with frequent biblical citations. It is more than the use of biblical resources. The Bible is, for Yoder, not simply one of the main textbooks that are frequently used for footnotes and bibliography. It is certainly the starting and the ending point of his political discussion. When he treats some political issue,

⁵¹ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations*, 191.

⁵² Critically speaking, Christian Realism, one of the western representatives in modern political theology most contains this kind of weakness, that is, lack of theology in political discourse.

he consults the Bible not in an abstract and superficial way of simply quoting some biblical verses, but in a concrete and substantial way of looking into the very story of the Bible. It is the reason that he strives to concentrate on Jesus himself. The works of Jesus in the world are not simply an academic resource nourishing Yoder's political discussion, but an actual manual establishing his political stance, i.e., nonviolent pacifism. Radically speaking, therefore, if Jesus had not been seen as a nonviolent pacifist in Yoder's biblical interpretation, Yoder would have not become a nonviolent pacifist.

In this respect, Yoder's biblical approach is more than theological. It is not just one of the modern theological reflections on politics. The biblical reflection on politics is, for Yoder, the unique Christian reflection on politics, which is not contaminated by the procedure of theologization. It is why he drops down 'christology' and takes 'jesulogy' in his political debate.⁵³ For Yoder, christological Jesus is not Jesus himself, but a theologized Christ. His political concern and stance begin with Jesus before Christ, and the works of Jesus in the bible prior to any theological interpretation on Christ. This effort of Yoder to maintain his theological (exactly speaking, biblical) identity in dealing with political issues needs to be reflected and highlighted in the modern discussion of political theology.

Secondly, it is necessary that Yoder's nonviolent pacifism be reminded in modern political theology. Among three approaches to war ethics, that is, just war, pacifism and the holy war,⁵⁴ it is a fact that just war has been actually strong, and pacifism and the holy war have been relatively weakened in the flow of modern political power. Particularly, it is hard to find a clear modern historical event of nonviolent pacifism. In this situation, it is very interesting that there was a certain modern historical event showing the political stance of nonviolent pacifism in the history of Korean peninsula: *March 1st Movement*, the Korean nonviolent pacifistic uprising against Japanese colonialism on March 1, 1919.⁵⁵ Indeed, *March 1st Movement* reminds of Yoder's nonviolent proclamation of 'jubilee year,' and the Declaration of *March 1st Movement* reminds of his pacifistic practice of 'jubilee prayer.' In terms that there was no nonviolent tradition like the Mennonite or Anabaptism in the history of Korea, it is very peculiar that *March 1st Movement* proceeded in a nonviolent pacifistic way. Hence, it is imperative that Korean

⁵³ In reverse, Oliver O'Donovan suggests Christology instead of Jesulogy in terms that the death and resurrection of Jesus fully vindicates the order of creation (Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123).

⁵⁴ Kenneth L. Vaux, *Ethics and the Gulf War*, 93.

⁵⁵ To understand *March 1st Movement* as a nonviolent pacifistic movement, see Dong Hwan Kim, "A Christian Political Reflection on the War History between Korea and Japan," *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 72 (2010), 230-32.

political theologians who have been socio-politically familiar with the so-called Augustinian western tradition of the just war should remember the fact that this kind of peculiar event occurred in Korean political history, and continue to provide its theological interpretation on it. For example, just as Yoder attempts in his nonviolent view to re-examine the western history and discover ‘radical reformation’ against the Reformation, so Korean political theologians need to re-investigate the Eastern history in a pacifistic view and seek to uncover something radical (like *March 1st Movement*).

Furthermore, Yoder’s nonviolent political stance is related not only to pacifism, but also to the holy war tradition that can give another theological advice to modern political theology. The trace of the holy war in Yoder’s politics is revealed when he suggests the notion of the ‘war of the lamb.’ As already mentioned, this notion is derived from the biblical idea of ‘God will fight for us’ according to 2 Chronicles 20:17. The main point of this idea is that the subject of the war is God and not man. In other words, the “war is not a human war, but totally exclusively the ‘war of Yahweh’ or the ‘war of God.’”⁵⁶ Therefore, there is no role of man in the holy war. The only role or action of man is, if any, to “stand still, and see” the victory of the LORD. In history, the main reason that this idea of the holy war was, as in Crusade, distorted is that the loss of the Subject (God), or the appearance of the new agent (man). Not to repeat such a distortion, modern political theology needs to listen to Yoder who asserts in the biblical view of nonviolence that the holy war is the war of the lamb and cannot be that of man.

Thirdly and finally, it is inevitable for modern political theology to discern the fact that Yoder suggest the cross not simply as the key word of his politics, but as an alternative of modern politics. In the modern discourse of political theology, the cross has been frequently the key word. Especially in a politically chaotic situation, the cross has been most embossed among the events of Jesus Christ, i.e., the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. Some liberation theologies such as the third world theology and *Minjung* theology are the examples of the theology of the cross. It is apparent that the key word of these theologies is the cross. However, it is not apparent that these cross-related theologies suggest the cross as a concrete political alternative. These political theologies accent the cross as their key notion and use it as the exemplar of the main contents such as suffering, death, coercion, oppression, and persecution. After this consideration, however, they tend to find their political alternatives in something after and beyond the cross, i.e., usually the resurrection that can draw hope and life.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ee Kon Kim, *A Theology of Suffering in the Book of Exodus* (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1989), 157.

⁵⁷ Of course, it may not be applied to all cross-related theologies. For instance, the death of God theology

When they suggest the resurrection as the alternative, the cross is usually regarded as something overcome to attain the final goal of hope and life.⁵⁸

On the contrary, the cross in Yoder's political theology is neither something beyond nor something overcome. Rather, it is something implemented as well as something activated. It is not only the climax of his political theology, but also the conclusion of it. Therefore, it can hardly find the resurrection in his political discourse. It is because even hope and life can be found and suggested in the cross itself. How can it be possible? It is possible because he is a *nonviolent* pacifist. From his nonviolent perspective, "it is the cross and not the sword – suffering, and not brute force – that determines the meaning of history."⁵⁹ As his political stance is nonviolent in the beginning and the end, the cross, which accurately implies a *nonviolent but vivid obedience to God alone and not man*, can be, even though it seems to be somehow pessimistic in action, suggested as a concrete political alternative. To be sure, some modern political theologians, who are based on the cross but not contend with it and pursue something more than it, need to deliberate Yoder's suggestion of the cross as alternative in a nonviolent political stance. Otherwise, it would be difficult for them to entirely overcome a temptation, i.e., the will to compromise with human power in the name of realizing something after and beyond the cross in the world.

Abstract

The goal of this article is to examine the political theology of John Howard Yoder who was one of the prominent theologians in the twentieth century, and also to discover what his political theology can provide for modern contextual political theology in the twenty-first century. In order to examine his political theology, firstly, it finds out that he adopts the biblical approach as his methodology, which focuses on the works of Jesus on earth, that his political stances are nonviolent pacifism with anti-Constantinianism and radical pacifism for minority, and that the main themes of his political theology are the idea of 'God will fight for us' and the notion of the cross as alternative. Based on this examination, secondly, it seeks to discover the current meaning of his political theology and make a challenge to modern political theology. What are

in the swirl of the World War concentrated on the cross itself which was the last stage of God's death. However, the cross was the last stage of it and no more because there was only nothing (nihilism) after it.

⁵⁸ It is Oliver O'Donovan that focuses on the resurrection beyond the cross and seeks to consider it as an alternative of political theology (Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 13-15; Dong Hwan Kim, "A Political Theology of Oliver O'Donovan," *Christian Social Ethics* 32 (2015), 208).

⁵⁹ Paul G. Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in John Howard Yoder and Oliver O'donovan* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 71.

discovered in this process are three: an awakening of his biblical approach, his pacifistic reinterpretation of violent history, and his pursuit of cross as alternative. What this article ultimately anticipates is that these three points would become three contributions of Yoder's theology with his nonviolent political stance to modern contextual political theology in the early twenty-first century in which pacifism has been relatively weakened and the just war tradition has been pervasive via the Iraq War.

Key Words: John Howard Yoder, Political Theology, Biblical Approach, Nonviolent Pacifism, Radical Pacifism, Constantinianism, Cross

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