

The Yoder file

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It is not often that the *Century* publishes a feature article about the sexual behavior of a theologian, but the case of John Howard Yoder ("[Theology and misconduct](#)") raises questions for all Christians, not just for the Mennonite community to which he belonged. What is the relationship between what a theologian writes and how he lives his life? Does the life make a difference in how we read the theology?

Yoder's behavior is particularly challenging for Mennonites to deal with, not only because he was a prominent Mennonite leader but because Mennonite theology has traditionally focused on ethics more than doctrine, on the life lived more than the beliefs espoused. When teachers of the Word don't practice what they preach, their teachings are looked at with suspicion. How could the most articulate spokesperson for Christian nonviolence in the 20th century engage in sexual behavior that was abusive and coercive and itself a form of violence?

Part of the Yoder story is about how the people to whom he was accountable and who struggled to discipline him did not respond adequately to the experiences of the women who suffered. Many people were left in the dark about the disciplinary process and about the facts of the case, and the women and their stories were marginalized. That helps explain why this part of Yoder's life has continued to be discussed and why the issues continue to resurface. The pain of the victims does not go away.

If the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church have taught us anything, it is that abusers must be removed from positions that allow them to continue their behavior and that efforts to deal with abuse must be handled with transparency.

A new level of openness has been adopted by the seminary that formerly employed Yoder and by the Mennonite Church USA. Last year a committee was formed to deal with the unfinished agenda, and it is working with a historian to craft and publish an account of Yoder's behavior and the church's response to it. It is also seeking means of healing for the women involved. A public ceremony of lament and healing has been proposed for the next year's MCUSA convention. A document on how to handle and prevent sexual abuse by church leaders is also in the works. The Mennonite experience may well provide a model for other denominations and institutions dealing with similar issues.

People could never quite look at Paul Tillich or Martin Luther King the same way once revelations about their sexual misconduct became known. Yet people still read these theologians with profit. As Martin Luther commented, God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line. Yoder's theology still demands to be read—both in light of his own life and in the light of the gospel he sought to expound.