

Theology and misconduct: The case of John Howard Yoder

**Yoder defined violence in terms of violating someone's dignity. This sounds ready made as a description of his own abusive behavior.**

by [David Cramer](#), [Jenny Howell](#), [Paul Martens](#), and [Jonathan Tran](#)

This article appears in the [August 20, 2014](#) issue.



Background image from Thinkstock

Thirty years after John Howard Yoder was first accused of sexual misconduct and almost two decades after his death in 1997, the story of his abusive behavior remains painfully unresolved in the Mennonite communities in which he was for decades regarded as the foremost theologian and chief representative of Anabaptist thought.

During his lifetime Yoder faced two separate disciplinary proceedings. The first led to his 1984 resignation from the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (now

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) in Elkhart, Indiana, after which he became a full-time professor at the University of Notre Dame, where he taught until his death. The second was conducted by the Mennonite Church from 1992 to 1996.

Last year a third discernment process was launched, spurred by women who believe that the church has repeatedly failed to uncover and acknowledge the truth.

In 2013, Ruth Krall, professor emeritus at Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Indiana, published *The Elephants in God's Living Room*, which used the church's response to Yoder's actions as a case study on how sexual abuse is often mishandled in the church. That same year, Barbra Graber, a retired professor at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, wrote a pair of online essays about Yoder's case. Soon after Graber's essays appeared, AMBS president Sara Wenger Shenk announced that the seminary had committed itself to "new transparency in the truth telling that must happen." Last summer the Mennonite Church USA formed a committee to "fairly and accurately document the scope of Yoder's sexual abuse and the church's response to it after a careful review of the evidence."

While most of the allegations against Yoder involve his work in Mennonite circles, some reported incidents occurred outside that sphere. Theologian Marva Dawn, a onetime doctoral student at Notre Dame, said that Yoder "made a few of the intimate moves others have accused him of making" while he was at Notre Dame.

Reports indicate that Yoder initiated many of the relationships and behaviors unilaterally, without anything resembling an invitation, and that these actions resulted in lifelong consequences for the women involved.

One woman who made public her story is Carolyn Holderread Heggen. She reported that Yoder sent her letters and asked for meetings, which she refused. In one letter, he invited Heggen to meet him at a conference, where he could watch her undress and nurse her infant.

"When I read the letter," Heggen said (as quoted in a 1992 article by Tom Price in the *Elkhart Truth*), "I felt I had been raped. The thought of this dirty old man sitting at his seminary desk fantasizing about my nude body was terrifying to me, and I felt extremely violated and angry."

Other reports cite acts of verbal intimidation, physical aggression, indecent exposure, and other types of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual

manipulation and violence.

Yoder's conduct is, of course, deeply reprehensible. His failings are of particular concern to the many people who have been deeply influenced—as the four of us have—by his theological writing. What does this personal behavior tell us, if anything, about his theological project? What follows is an attempt to make a theological reckoning of Yoder's behavior in light of his own theology.

The most glaring issue is the contradiction between his behavior and his long-standing commitment to Christian nonviolence. Yoder is probably the best known and most influential advocate in the 20th century for Christian pacifism. Yoder's christological pacifism disallowed the use of force even to protect society's most vulnerable people. Yet it appears he used force against vulnerable people, namely, the women who came under his influence as a teacher and scholar.

Though Yoder wrote about nonviolence primarily in the context of war, his own definition of violence was much broader. The term *violence* is meaningless, he once wrote, “apart from the concept of that which is being violated. That which is violated is the dignity or integrity of some being.”

He went on: “As soon as either verbal abuse or bodily coercion moves beyond that border line of loving enhancement of the dignity of persons, we are being violent. The extremes of the two dimensions are of course killing and the radical kind of insult which Jesus in Matthew 5 indicates *is just as bad*. I believe it is a Christian imperative always to respect the dignity of every person: I must never willingly or knowingly violate that dignity” (emphasis added).

This description of violence not only describes Yoder's intrusive behaviors; it sounds ready-made for that purpose. In fact, Yoder writes that in Latin “the verb ‘to violate’ is the same as the verb ‘to rape’: it refers to the purity or integrity or self-determination *of a woman*” (emphasis added). If one uses as a litmus test Yoder's own theology—which configures Christian discipleship as nonviolence and links the kingdom of God with the church's peaceableness—it is clear that he violated his own tenets.

Yoder's response to the various disciplinary proceedings he encountered reveals another inconsistency. According to almost every account, he resisted being held accountable. Two particular instances can be highlighted.

Marlin Miller served as president of AMBS in the 1980s during and after Yoder's time there, and it fell to Miller to deal with the problems Yoder created for the seminary's students and staff. Women affected by Yoder's behavior apparently felt safe in reporting to Miller, so he did not lack evidence. Various sources tell of Miller's substantial collection of files documenting Yoder's behavior. The women's willingness to report Yoder's behavior and Miller's willingness to compile those reports would seem to indicate that AMBS had a strong case against Yoder.

But one thing stood in the way of holding Yoder accountable: John Howard Yoder. No matter how often and how determinedly Miller dealt with him, Yoder refused to admit to any wrongdoing. And this went on for years. People with knowledge of the situation almost universally recount two things: Miller's valiant efforts and Yoder's bullying defiance.

When ecclesial accountability groups tried to discipline Yoder in the early 1990s, they sought to operate along the very lines Yoder himself championed in describing discipline in the church. In his 1992 book *Body Politics*, Yoder describes the ecclesial activity of "binding and loosing" (Matt. 18:15-20):

That promised guide, the Holy Spirit, will operate in the community to make present, for hitherto unforeseen times and places and questions, the meaning of the call of Jesus. It uses a fully human communication process, called by rabbis "binding and loosing." It has about it elements of what today would be called conflict resolution. It gathers up the resources of human wisdom, the perspectives of several kinds of involvement in different ways of perceiving a question, and loving processes of negotiation, all of this guided and enabled by God's own presence.

Yoder's teaching on communal binding and loosing—which shows up regularly in his work from the 1960s through the 1990s—is not unrelated to his work on pacifism. He envisions the work of binding and loosing, which can be understood as a Christian approach to conflict resolution, as integral to the very form and rationale of christological pacifism.

But when Yoder himself came under the scope of Matthew 18, he argued that his accusers needed to meet with him face to face—a gloss on how to read Matthew 18 that he explicitly rejected in some of his writings, including *The Royal Priesthood*. Dealing with the practicalities of binding and loosing, Yoder there wrote:

If the standards appealed to by those who would reprove someone are inappropriate, the best way to discover this is through the procedure of person-to-person conversation with reconciling intent. Thus the group's standards can be challenged, tested and confirmed, or changed as is found necessary, in the course of their being applied. The result of the process, whether it ends with the standards being changed or reconfirmed, is to record a new decision as part of the common background of the community, thus accumulating further moral insights by which to be guided in the future.

Face-to-face encounter is allowed and may even be required, but not necessarily between accuser and accused, as in a court of law. One can certainly imagine instances in which a reconciling process requires that accuser and accused be in the same room. But one can equally imagine an accountability group judging such a confrontation to be unhelpful to the disciplinary process. Deciding between those two possible forms of discernment is as important, according to Yoder's writings, as the content of whatever is discerned, and the onus of its adjudication falls on the working group and the relevant parties, not on the accused victimizer and his alleged victims.

It is only by stretching some parts and ignoring others that Yoder can make his theology of binding and loosing require victims to face their victimizer face to face. And in no way does Yoder in his writings allow for one person to determine the course of the group's work. Even if Yoder thought—as he did—that the accountability group did not pass muster, that it was doing the bidding of what he referred to as “the Mennonite women's posse,” it would not be up to him exclusively to render that judgment.

By his reinterpretation of a text central to Anabaptist discipline, Yoder created a defensive scheme that was unfortunately effective. The irony then and now is unmistakable: Yoder viewed himself as above the very fraternal admonition that he demanded of others.

Do Yoder's violations of his own theological claims undermine the content of his theology? Do his sins disqualify him from the major role he has played in modern Christian thought? We certainly understand the seriousness of these questions. It is undoubtedly difficult to know how to receive gifts from sinful people. But ever since the church settled the Donatist controversy in the early fifth century, the church has agreed that such gifts can and should be received.

Reading theology is not as simple as picking between heroes and villains; more difficult and more worthwhile is examining the histories that produced theological texts and how God makes use of them.

People who find Yoder's theology helpful do so because they see it as articulating what God in Christ asks of them in the scriptures, as clarified by the broad theological tradition. Even if they got rid of all of Yoder's books, they would still find themselves facing the truths to which Yoder bore (a deeply flawed) witness.

Yet another problem must be confronted. It may be that Yoder's actions were, in his mind, not just convenient exceptions to this theology but consistent with his own theology. There is some evidence that in pursuing Christian women, Yoder might have been applying his own understanding of radical theology.

In his 1971 book *The Original Revolution*, Yoder describes the "original revolution" as "the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them." In his 1984 text, *The Priestly Kingdom*, he describes this "minority community" as the kingdom's "first fruits," writing, "The church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately" and that "the confessing people of God is the new world on its way." Such a vision of the church has been enthusiastically adopted by many of Yoder's readers on matters of justice, peace, and democracy.

Yet Yoder also included among the "pilot programs" of the church the realization of physically intimate relationships among men and women within the church who might be single or married to others. Since the early 1970s, Yoder had been circulating for public consideration reformulations of family, sexuality, and intimacy that he thought the Holy Spirit was calling the church to make. In these writings (sometimes sent to the women he contacted), Yoder challenged the idols of romantic love that denigrated singleness as a proper Christian vocation. In pursuing what he called "nongenital affective relationships" with women, Yoder may very well have seen himself "incarnating" the "deviant set of values" of this "distinct community." Apparently, as strange as it may be, Yoder believed that his actions, often misunderstood as abusive, were really serving to incarnate a revolutionary "new world."

If we are not going to abandon Yoder's theology after all that has happened, and if we want to make use of it in light of those happenings, we suggest that the source

material for doing so lies in his most famous work, *The Politics of Jesus*, where Yoder talks about “the powers” as 1) created for good; 2) fallen and corrupted; and 3) redemptively still used by God in God’s providential restoration of creation. By “powers,” Yoder meant those structures that God has set in place to order creaturely life. When in working condition, creation is ordered by these powers toward its own flourishing.

In Yoder’s life, such powers might be seen as the structures through which he practiced his teaching vocation, the relational structures of a large family in which he and his wife brought up five children, and the professional theological world through which Yoder could disseminate his work. “These structures were created by God,” Yoder writes. “It is the divine purpose that within human existence there should be a network of norms and regularities to stretch out the canvas upon which the tableau of life can be painted.” But, he adds, “the powers have rebelled and are fallen. They did not accept the modesty that would have permitted them to remain conformed to the creative purpose, but rather they claimed for themselves an absolute value.”

We might read Yoder’s failings as a tragic manifestation of this rebellion. He twisted his teaching vocation into a structure for predatory behaviors; he distorted mentorship and influence for untoward purposes; he used analytic stubbornness to isolate himself from community; he perverted academic achievement in order to manipulate and bully others.

While it might be overstated to personalize what Yoder imagined as primarily suprapersonal realities, it is hard not to hear Yoder unwittingly describing himself when he portrays the powers: “The structures fail to serve us as they should. They do not enable humanity to live a genuinely free, loving life. They have absolutized themselves and they demand from the individual and society an unconditional loyalty. They harm and enslave us. *We cannot live with them.*”

In these ways, the brilliance of Yoder’s theology became a foothold for the devil, and the structures put in place for his theological success gave way to the fallen powers. Indeed, we find Yoder’s inability to imagine the powers as personalized, as the logic of his theology warrants, indicative of the measure of self-deception that came to possess him.

Yoder stole that which is meant to be shared; left to his own devices, the gifts of his theology would die with his reputation. And yet, “despite their fallen condition, the Powers cannot fully escape the providential sovereignty of God, who is still able to use them for good.”

Against his best efforts, John Howard Yoder cannot escape God. *The Politics of Jesus* is one of the great texts of Christian discipleship. It will remain that way not because Yoder’s life warrants that place in history but because God providentially uses the fallen for good.

Some will take this as bad news. We see it as good news. We do so because we see in Yoder’s complicated theological legacy, as we have attempted to make clear, the Lamb of God made victorious.

We conclude with a story on how God’s triumph has “made a public example” of Yoder. According to Yoder, Christ’s restoration of the powers comes to fruition through the establishment of the church as the structure that instantiates God’s restoration of the world. Against the old powers of sin, the church becomes a politics of witness, a politics of resistance. He quotes Hendrik Berkhof: “The very existence of the church, in which Gentiles and Jews, who heretofore walked according to the [elements] of the world, live together in Christ’s fellowship, is itself a proclamation, a sign, a token, to the Powers that their unbroken dominion has come to an end.”

Stymied by hushed and impotent institutions, Yoder’s victims banded together and became the church that Yoder could, apparently, only write about. When Carolyn Holderread Heggen, whose story we reported above, tried to gather victims to address Yoder’s behavior, she was at first blocked by then AMBS president Marlin Miller, who cited agreements that had been made regarding confidentiality. But a supportive editor at the Mennonite publication *Gospel Herald* pressured Miller to agree to send Heggen’s invitation to other victims. Her letter to them began, “Dear Sisters.”

What happened next occurred against Yoder’s wishes, but with the grain of his theological universe. As Heggen recounts it:

We came from all over the U.S. and spent two days together in Elkhart, Indiana, where we shared our stories, consoled and supported each other, wrote a composite story of our personal experiences of violation from John, and outlined eight steps we wanted the church to take. . . . We took turns reading paragraphs



of the story of our violation by John. Many of us experienced similar things with John and the story felt like each of ours.

When we had finished reading this, I went around the circle and addressed each [of the Mennonite officials present], “Do you believe us?” If there was any doubt about our veracity, I wanted them to express it then and there. They responded in seriousness and respect—some with tears. I believe they were shocked at the extent of John’s abuse and the pain it had caused us.

Their only questions were wanting to clarify what we were asking them to now do. They said they needed time to process this together and asked if they could serve us dinner later that evening. Together they had made homemade soup and bread and prepared a beautiful fruit plate. They served us, and it felt like a holy time of communion together.

*A longer version of this essay is available at [The Other Journal](#).*