

The Gospel of a People

When the Jerusalem temple police arrested some of Jesus' spokesmen for the second time, the spokesmen offered a defense of their dissidence. They said that God had made Jesus "ruler and savior to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:31). In response, Jerusalem's governing council

was infuriated and moved to impose the death penalty. But someone in the council stood up. It was a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was held in honor by all the people. He ordered that the men [Jesus' spokesmen] be placed outside for a moment, and he addressed them [the rest of the council]:

"Men of Israel, be careful in what you are about to do with these men. For in recent days Theudas emerged, claiming to be someone important, and a number of men joined him, some four hundred. But he was put to death, and as many as were won over by him were disbanded and came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean emerged in the days of the census and drew a company of people away under him. He too was destroyed and as many as were won over by him were scattered. And so, in the case now before us, I say to you, leave these men alone and release them. Because if this movement or this work be merely of

human beings, it will be destroyed. But if it is of God, you will not be able to destroy them, and you may well be found God-fighters.”

And they were persuaded by him. (Acts 5:33-39)¹

Rabbi Gamaliel sees that the community of Jesus’ disciples is a politically subversive movement within Israel. It lays claim to Israel’s legacy. It is not a merely religious or spiritual movement. It is on the order of the political revolutions attempted by Theudas and Judas the Galilean,² although the Jesus movement has, by contrast, refused to marshal a violent militia. And yet, this understanding of the Jesus movement leads Rabbi Gamaliel to defy the decision of the rest of the council, which has already condemned this latest uprising and moved to kill Jesus’ detained spokesmen. He questions the council’s authority to undertake the dissolution of Jesus’ community by violence or even to police it to the margins of Israel. He apparently cannot discard the possibility that God has commissioned the revolution of Jesus for Israel. His understanding of Israel is, we might say, too catholic to simply outlaw this dissident voice. It must be met with patience.

There is ostensibly nothing that Jesus or his spokesmen have said or done that immediately disqualifies their claim to witness to Israel’s promised future. That God has raised one man from the dead ahead of the many God will yet raise is not in itself out of the question. That many of Jerusalem’s authorities had colluded to crucify this same one whom God has now allegedly raised to be Lord for the sake of Israel is not impossible, however offensive it is to Jerusalem’s governing council. Instead of ruling their testimony out of court, Rabbi Gamaliel claims that the truth of the witness of Jesus’ spokesmen can be judged—and this is crucial—*only with time*. God

1. All biblical quotations in this chapter are my translations unless otherwise noted.

2. Cf. Josephus’s account of these revolutionary figures (*Jewish War*, 2:117–118; *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:1–8; 20:97).

has shown in past cases like those of Theudas and Judas the Galilean that God's providence can be trusted to deal by various means with Israelite movements that threaten Israel's integrity and faithfulness, if that is what Jesus' movement turns out to have been. The activity of God exceeds Israel's authorities and so must be waited upon instead of fictitiously (legally) co-opted or preempted, as Israel continues to wander through time, with its God both leading and following. To pronounce the final judgment of death independently of how Jesus' community develops in time, in relation to both the rest of Israel and gentile powers, is to usurp God's judgment rather than to witness to it. It is to undermine the very integrity and faithfulness of Israel that such a pronouncement would profess to protect. This is the wisdom of Rabbi Gamaliel, "a Pharisee and teacher of the law who was held in honor by all the people."

Our modern sensibilities would like to describe Rabbi Gamaliel's wisdom as "religious tolerance" or even "commitment to the political process," neither of which is a bad idea. But that is not what Rabbi Gamaliel is displaying. He is witnessing to something much deeper at work in the life of the people of Israel, the politics of which refuses to separate judgment from the flow of time or to imagine God's saving activity independently of the course of Israel through history. Rabbi Gamaliel refuses time-less criteria. The politics to which he bears witness is not generic, however. Its historical provenance and concrete development on the earth are not incidental or secondary to what this politics is, as a mere species of a general political genus would be. It is not merely a "model" to be appropriated by this community or that; its human context of application is not undetermined. In short, it is not the politics of just any history or of just any people but of the concrete, ongoing history and people of Israel, its extended drama as a political community. It is a politics that grows out of God's election of Israel such that it proceeds with

the patient confidence that Israel is held together in the flesh by something more powerful than anything it can do to ensure its own continuity, integrity, and future as a people.

Of course, this understanding of Israel's election presumes that election operates with a particular ethical force. The force of Israel's election for Rabbi Gamaliel is not to justify whatever self-defense Israel (through the Sanhedrin authority) sees fit to undertake, such that Israel is entitled to do anything to preserve itself (e.g., put Jesus' spokesmen to death). Quite the opposite: God's election means that Israel does not fully know the self it would seek to defend or preserve. Israel must struggle to further find itself in time. That is not to say that Israel has no continuous self, no particular identity, for it has grown from an irreplaceable past that reverberates into the present and must be reckoned with rather than forsaken. But God's electing Israel makes it an eschatologically oriented people, a people that must wait upon God for its promised future. That is not easy for its people or its authorities to remember, especially when they are suffering or facing mortal danger. That is when God's election can be perverted into political self-assertion, as it apparently was by much of Jerusalem's council in Acts 5. Thus, the irrevocable and unfolding nature of God's election of Israel saddles its authorities and the rest of its people with ominous temptations (e.g., Jer. 7:4-11; Matt. 21:12-14).

But as Rabbi Gamaliel seems to understand it, God's election empowers Israel to expose itself to risks that are typically unthinkable for other peoples. Death does not hold the same power over the elect people that it does over others. As a result, a given generation of the people of Israel can confront threats like Theudas, Judas the Galilean, and Jesus in a way that inspires political life rather than the closure induced by violence. To this death-enduring life, and thus life-giving death, Rabbi Gamaliel bears witness, and this life-giving death reaches full disclosure in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The

New Testament describes Jesus as God's elect one. Yet, being God's chosen did not move Jesus to live as if his own life were sacred and to be defended unconditionally. That is the way of the kingdoms of the world (John 18:36). As the elect one, Jesus "came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Perhaps I'm reading too much into Rabbi Gamaliel's speech. If only he'd known what those spokesmen of Jesus would go on to do! They would galvanize a movement of immeasurable historical power that would often spurn his wisdom, claiming in various ways to know Israel's self fully and intuitively, and to embody it exclusively. In many cases it would obey the spirit possessing Jerusalem's council in Acts 5 before Rabbi Gamaliel's speech and turn its guns on non-Christian Jews like him. The path of its theological reasoning would eventually help make room, as it turns out, for modern ideologies that have configured the Jews as the enemy of the state, a community to be eradicated by unspeakable atrocities. Perhaps Rabbi Gamaliel was not, after all, the voice of deep theological wisdom I have made him out to be. Maybe he was simply a shortsighted pragmatist who thought he knew a needless political quagmire when he saw one. Or perhaps he is a character concocted by a Christian writer simply to vindicate Jews of Gamaliel's ilk and make Christians look even better. We shall have to wait and see in what follows.

In order to consider the sort of political existence that is election by the God of Israel, I will first clarify with the help of John Howard Yoder how the Christian life is that of a people and what this life has to do with God's chosen people Israel. At the end of chapter 2, I will ask what Yoder might make of the politics of Rabbi Gamaliel. In the meantime, I intend to show how peoplehood is central to Yoder's account of the politics of the Christian life and how the Christian peoplehood he describes must be understood as also Jewish. I will then turn in the next chapter to criticize Yoder's account of Judeo-

Christian peoplehood for its neglect of the election of Israel and its implicit claim that the people of the God of Israel is self-constituting, that is, that it consists only in communities and members who make good on their claim to be the people of God (i.e., by being faithful). In so doing, I will be laying the groundwork for a constructive account of how the people of the God of Israel is not self-constituting but constituted by God, who disciplines unfaithfulness by holding the faithful and unfaithful together as one people.³ The term for this ongoing activity of God is “election,” and I contend that attending to it deals with Yoder’s inadequacies in a way that is consonant with his own program of peace. In the course of these opening two chapters, then, I hope to crystallize the central question of everything that follows: How does the election of the people of Israel determine what it means to be Christian? My concern in formulating this question with Yoder’s help and then going on to address it is not primarily theoretical, though theoretical reform is indeed a subsidiary concern. My primary concern is the way that Christian collective self-understanding informs the way that Christians live, not least our willingness to kill and our corresponding, internal hostility. The violence we direct against our enemies cannot be separated from the violence within the Christian community.

Situating John Howard Yoder’s Quest for Peoplehood

For all of his insistence that he was merely reporting and synthesizing the findings of others, Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* has proven to be a watershed. With a historically sensitive reading of the Gospel of Luke, Paul’s letters, and other New Testament writings, he substantiated the audacious claim that “The ministry and claims of

3. This is not to imply that Israel is passive in its constitution over time. My constructive account in this and the following chapters will attempt to articulate how Israel’s agency is related to its constitution by the God of Israel.

Jesus are best understood as presenting . . . one particular social-political-ethical option.”⁴ Yoder thus debunked the standard assumption that Jesus was of primarily religious or personal significance and only derivatively of social, political, or ethical import. Instead, Jesus’ nonviolent way of living, which was his way of dying, constituted a certain political way of being, as attested by the political shape of early Christian communities. This is not simply a possible construal of the historical person Jesus; it is, Yoder argued, how Jesus is presented in the New Testament, which claims not to dream up a compelling character but to treat of the Jewish man of flesh and blood who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Only this distinctively political life, then, according to Yoder, can be the basis of sound claims about the person and work of Christ and what it means to be Christian.

Claims about Jesus that downplay the political way he lived are either not historically truthful or inconsistent with the Christian confession of the incarnation. They minimize or distort the political shape of the Jesus presented in the New Testament, or imply that the political shape of Jesus’ flesh was only the shell of a more substantive reality, perhaps a “spiritual” one. Therefore, to accommodate Jesus to a political ethic of self-preservation and “responsibility” in the name of some more determinative truth *about* Jesus (e.g., a “religious” or “spiritual” truth), as much of the church has in fact done through its history, is a christological mistake. It is to deny that Jesus, in the political fullness of his flesh, was God’s decisive revelation; it is to be guided, instead, by some ethical norm other than Jesus as presented in Scripture, by “other lights.”⁵ The christological stakes are thus significant, for “if Jesus is human but not normative, is this not the

4. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit agnus noster*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994 [1972]), 11.

5. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1971), 125–39.

ancient ebionitic heresy? If he be somehow authoritative but not in his humanness, is this not a new gnosticism?”⁶

This means that Rudolph Bultmann and Billy Graham are both wrong about the gospel. They are not wrong because they present Jesus as liberating human selves from anxiety, guilt, confusion, immorality, or eternal punishment. Jesus may be said to do that. They are wrong because that sort of liberation is not the gospel. It is not what Jesus is about according to the New Testament. To make such personal liberation the subject of Jesus’ life is therefore to narrow our gaze considerably and finally to betray him. It is to regard Jesus’ flesh as only an apparition and to relocate the drama of his life from history to an individualized human experience that owes little to Jesus and is only incidentally in time.⁷

The Politics of Jesus is thus concerned with overcoming deeply entrenched personalist understandings of Jesus and the resulting Constantinian reduction of Christianity to a “religion.” Such personalist understandings wrongly imagine that individual persons are more fundamental than the groups of which they are a part, that human groups are no more than the sum of the persons that compose them, and that Jesus therefore relates to individual persons more determinatively than he does to communities or social structures. We must, it is thought, choose between the personal and the political and

6. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 10. *The Politics of Jesus* is thus fundamentally a work in Christology, although this is often overlooked because history is seldom deemed the proper theatre of Christology. Rather, it is assumed that Christology is a discourse about natures that is not determined by any historical contingency. For Yoder, one cannot study divinity or humanness apart from how God and human beings have unfolded in time. The way Jesus lived, then, constitutes who God is and who humanity is. Concepts of divinity or humanness condition but cannot predetermine historical consideration of who Jesus is. Cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Eschatological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 95 and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 31.

7. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 31–32; John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 82; Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 73.

prioritize the former. The Jesus we are left with is one who steered clear of the contaminating mess of politics and busied himself with the more important task of restoring individual souls. This Jesus has proven very useful for the religious justification of violence, as Jesus' nonviolence in the body becomes insignificant and he is taken to constitute some good worth killing for (e.g., killing to preserve the political order in which persons can be "saved from their sins").

Personalist understandings of Jesus are possible, Yoder suggests, only if we forget that Jesus was a Jew. However unwittingly, such understandings are anti- or at least a-Jewish. The Jewish way of life from which Jesus hailed—the Jewish way of life of the Hebrew prophets—knows nothing of a personalist flight from the political.⁸ Thus, Yoder frames the *The Politics of Jesus* as a defense of a *messianic ethic*.⁹ He shows that a much more historically and theologically sensitive reading results if, instead of stripping Jesus of his Jewishness and reducing his proper domain to "the heart," we recognize him as fully incarnate and active in the common, brutal struggle known as the political, that fray where peoples are forged in the heat of mutual opposition and cooperation.

But what *The Politics of Jesus* has to do with peoplehood may remain unclear. For some, the question of peoplehood is secondary to politics in general and the politics of Jesus in particular. Few would deny that politics involves human community, but community has come to be a generic concept that is distinguishable from the political itself, as community is often understood as only a component or circumstance of the political (which is in turn more about "issues" and "structures"). And peoplehood—a more ambitious and exclusive concept than community—is sometimes deemed the preemption of good politics, at least of the innocent sort that Jesus supposedly

8. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 108–9.

9. Ch. 1 is entitled, "The Possibility of a Messianic Ethic."

embodied. The politics of Jesus may be about peace, justice, and love, but none of these is determined in relation to any peoplehood, it is thought. Not so, says Yoder. To the justification of violence in the name of preserving or enhancing “the people,” Jesus does not respond with a politics that avoids peoplehood. He answers violent peoplehood with a peoplehood of his own: a nonviolent one. That Christians can think that politics is about something other than peoplehood is yet another anti- or a-Jewish habit that we must unlearn if we are to reckon with Jesus. The politics of Jesus, according to Yoder, simply consists in making a people:

God’s promises of righteousness to be brought to the nations through His servant Israel were from year to year reiterated, reinforced, clarified, even though the likelihood that the Israelites would become the instrument of their fulfillment seemed less and less evident. These were promises, Christians believe, Jesus came to keep. Jesus did again what God had done in calling Abraham or Moses or Gideon or Samuel: He gathered His people around His word and His will. Jesus created around Himself a society like no other society mankind has ever seen:

1. This was a voluntary society: you could not be born into it. You could come into it only by repenting and freely pledging allegiance to its king. It was a society with no second generation members.
2. It was a society which, counter to all precedent, was mixed in its composition. It was mixed racially, with both Jews and gentiles; mixed religiously, with fanatical keepers of the law and advocates of liberty from all forms; with both radical monotheists and others just in the process of disentangling their minds from idolatry; mixed economically, with members both rich and poor.
3. When He called His society together Jesus gave its members a new way of life to live. He gave them a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership—by drawing upon the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not smashing the

old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the “enemy nation.”¹⁰

Jesus did not bring to faithful Israel any corrected ritual or any new theories about the being of God. He brought them a new peoplehood and a new way of living together. The very existence of such a group is itself a deep social change. Its very presence was such a threat that He had to be crucified. But such a group is not only by its existence a novelty on the social scene; if it lives faithfully, it is also the most powerful tool of social change.¹¹

We will return to the Jewishness of the politics of Jesus below. For now, let us clarify Yoder’s claim that Jesus did not embody or teach an ethic of which a people is merely the context, support, or epiphenomenon. He did not constitute a political imperative that can be safely appropriated by any people or applied willy-nilly within any existing social or political structure, vocational office, or “situation.” Jesus is not such an abstraction in search of concretion. To understand the politics of Jesus in this way mistakes Yoder’s wild claims for something much more tame, something happy to regard the relevance of Jesus as predetermined by independently existing social structures (e.g., family, country), that is, defined contexts that we take to be universal or foundational to human existence. It is to accommodate Jesus to some structure supposedly more fundamental than he is, to overlook that Jesus confronts all social structures, calling into question (and revealing) even what it means to be human.

10. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 28–29. Also in Yoder, *For the Nations*, 175–76. In ch. 2, I will consider Yoder’s claim that Second Temple Jewish society was a voluntary one, as it controversially implies that one was not born a Jew but chose to be Jewish.

11. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 31. In other contexts Yoder does not conflate “society” and peoplehood as he does here (e.g., Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 37, 106, 155, 189, 247). In view in what I have quoted is the most determinative form of human association. His usual term for that form of community is “people.”

Refusing such accommodation, Yoder insists that the politics of Jesus simply was the formation of a people. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection generated a particular, concrete people, one that was unique vis-à-vis other peoples and has persisted to the present. The particularity of this people does not consist in arbitrary relation to Jesus by virtue of its beliefs about Jesus or its institutional continuity since Jesus. Its particularity consists in the way its collective life is in fact patterned after Jesus, obedient to his commands. Thus, Jesus announced and enacted a "new peoplehood"¹² constituted by practices of mutual self-giving, whose touchstone is the love of enemies and whose social economy moves from cross to resurrection. The cross to bear is not just any burden the Christian finds herself beset by, as common English usage would have it, but the raised standard of this people's costly, nonviolent political ethos, "its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them."¹³ The peoplehood of Jesus thus consists in a collective perseverance in the nonviolent political life that Jesus revealed to the world, refusing any peoplehood constituted by the violent subjugation of enemies, be they internal or external. Exposing the violent foundation of other political constitutions (whatever their claims to be founded on "justice" or "freedom") by deviant counterexample draws persecution, and so the Christian life is one of taking up a cross as Jesus did.

But some may still think that Yoder's account of the people inaugurated by Jesus is one among many commendable political options. That might be the case only if God did not raise Jesus from the dead, only if Jesus is just one among many lords. If God did raise Jesus from the dead, however—disclosing the goal of history right in the middle of it—then the people gathered by Jesus is the one people

12. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 24.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.