How Mennonite Theology Became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver

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The many challenges and changes that faced North American Mennonites in the twentieth century evoked frequent self-examination which, in turn, yielded ever-developing self-understandings. This essay traces one strand of this evolving self-understanding, namely, a strand of theologically-rooted self-understanding that (a) crystallized in the middle of the twentieth century through the influence of Harold Bender, (b) was given legitimization and affirmation by John Howard Yoder, and (c) has been appropriated and ambitiously energized in recent decades by J. Denny Weaver among others. The purpose of the following, therefore, is to sketch these three significant shifts within a substantial trajectory of twentieth-century Mennonite theology that have contributed to this trajectory's internal revision and, rather ironically, to its volatilization. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this evolving strand as the "distillation trajectory" in Mennonite

theology because the primary *modus operandi* of this minimalist strand is to distill Mennonite theological identity into a group of central and particular markers—usually ethical markers—that make it uniquely or specifically *Mennonite*. Of course, it is important to note up front that this is certainly not the only trajectory Mennonite theology has taken in the past century.[1] But, this trajectory has been tremendously influential because it has self-consciously played a pervasively defining role over the last seventy years through the shaping of several generations of pastors, teachers, and denominational administrators.

The primary theme that drives what I have termed the distillation trajectory is the issue of self-identity, or, more specifically, the question of what it means to be a Mennonite. This is to say that the central characters in the trajectory are motivated by a desire to preserve or restore—for the current and future generations—what was particularly important and defining for Mennonites in the past. At least initially, the trajectory depends upon the history of Anabaptism, which usually means sixteenth-century Anabaptism, to distill the core or essence of the Anabaptist legacy, a core or essence that then becomes the fulcrum upon which Mennonite identity (including and perhaps especially Mennonite theology and ethics) pivots. To restate this thesis, the distillation trajectory is fundamentally concerned with affirming, inculcating, and preserving the special, unique, distinct, or distinguishing core of true Mennonite identity. This essay argues that it is precisely this form of the desire to identify, inculcate, and preserve the special, unique, distinct, or distinguishing core of Anabaptism that inadvertently makes Mennonite theology superfluous.

I. Bender's Popular Distillation of Anabaptism

In the middle of the twentieth century, Harold Bender was what you might call "Mr. Mennonite."[2] He was a history professor at Goshen College and Goshen Biblical Seminary; he founded the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the Mennonite Historical Library; he served as president of the American Society of Church History and the Mennonite World Conference; he was the leading editor of *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*; he contributed to the creation of Civilian Public Service; and so on. While his institutional legacy lives on indomitably, Bender may be most famous for the presidential address he presented to the American Society of Church History in 1943, the address later published as *The*

Anabaptist Vision.[3] Speaking in the middle of World War II, Bender sought to explain that Anabaptists were not an anti-worldly, misanthropic, sectarian movement. Rather, he argued that Anabaptists were the first announcement "in modern history of a programme for a new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially America and England, has been slowly realizing."[4] Or, to state his agenda more directly, Bender sought to argue that Anabaptists were the forerunners of what makes American (and English) society great—freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, for example. Behind these modern appropriations, however, lies what Bender refers to as the "great vision that shaped their course in history and for which they gladly gave their lives."[5]

According to Bender, the vision of the early Anabaptists consisted of three "central teachings," "major points of emphasis," "elements," or "principles" drawn from "genuine Anabaptism": (1) the essence of Christianity as discipleship; (2) a conception of the church as a brotherhood; and (3) a new ethic of love and nonresistance.[6] Bender is most certainly right that these affirmations can frequently be found among sixteenth-century Anabaptist documents. Yet, I have singled out Bender as the popular source of this trajectory because his approach to the question of Anabaptist identity is both novel and surprisingly enduring.

Briefly, there are four critical features of Bender's distillation that set an innovative trajectory in motion. First, Bender argued that there is one definable and quantifiable thing called "Anabaptism" in the sixteenth century, namely, the "original evangelical and constructive Anabaptism" which emerged out of Zwinglianism in Zurich in 1525, became established in the Low Countries in 1533, maintained an unbroken course in Switzerland, South Germany, Austria, and Holland, and continues "until the present day in the Mennonite movement."[7] And, in a turn that might seem unusual to someone unfamiliar with contemporary Anabaptism, Bender's criteria are not directly related to the literal meaning of the term Anabaptist—those who rebaptized persons who had been baptized as children. Historians of Anabaptism recognize that Bender was doing little more than following the lead of John Horsch, his father-in-law, in his description. Yet, as James Stayer rightly pointed out already in the 1970s, Bender's institutional positions, especially his role as the editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, allowed him to promote research that supported Horsch's understanding of the evangelical Anabaptists, that is, those sixteenth-century Anabaptists who were in "doctrinal

uniformity with the Mennonite churches that he knew in North America" with nonresistance being the "litmus test" of this uniformity.[8] In effect, therefore, Bender's description of Anabaptism allowed what was true for one group of Anabaptists—the Swiss Brethren—to paradigmatically determine what counts as "genuine" Anabaptism.

Second, Bender's definition of what is "central" to Anabaptists is anthropocentric and explicitly suggests that human action—discipleship, voluntary church membership, and nonresistance—is the essence of Christianity. This is not to say that Bender did not believe in God, that he was not really a Christian, or any nonsense of that sort. But, it is to say that he locates the essence of Anabaptist Christianity in human activity when he sums up his understanding of "the essential nature of Christianity" as follows:

> Is Christianity primarily a matter of the reception of divine grace through a sacramental-sacerdotal institution (Roman Catholicism), is it chiefly enjoyment of the inner experience of the grace of God through faith in Christ (Lutheranism), or is it most of all the transformation of life through discipleship (Anabaptism)? The Anabaptists were neither institutionalists, mystics, nor pietists, for they laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life. To them it was unthinkable for one truly to be a Christian without creating a new life on divine principles both for himself and for all men who commit themselves to the Christian way.[9]

Whether intentional or not, this second critical feature is somewhat of a misrepresentation of sixteenth-century Anabaptists who, almost universally,[10] began their confessions of faith (and their theological treatises, for that matter) with attention to the primary and fundamentally important reality that the work of God, especially in the life and death of Jesus Christ, is the essential foundation of Christianity. Or, another way to state this critical feature is to note that the isolation or segregation of select emphases as essential elements of Anabaptist thought is performed by Bender in a way that suppresses or relativizes their dependence upon the overarching theological metanarrative of God's saving action. As I hope is clear shortly, it is this critical feature that allows for—or opens the door for—the vast majority of the theological claims and convictions of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists to drop out of the ensuing discourse.

The third critical feature in Bender's vision is that nonresistance is virtually "new" to the Anabaptists.[11] Technically, Bender makes this claim when speaking of Anabaptism in its "Reformation context," and he does acknowledge that this position had "earlier

prophets," of which he names only Peter Chelčický.[12] Yet, it is also important to note Bender's claim that these earlier prophets left "no continuing practice of the principle [of nonviolence] behind them."[13] In this way, Anabaptist nonviolence is unique in that it was "thoroughly believed and resolutely practiced by all the original Anabaptist Brethren and their descendants throughout Europe from the beginning until the last century."[14] In this critical feature, Bender is of course emphasizing the importance of nonresistance to Anabaptism. But, just as important for his heirs, he is describing Anabaptism in opposition to other forms of Christianity: not only is nonresistance uniquely Anabaptist in the Reformation era, an entirely new Anabaptist social ethic emerged that could be sharply and oppositionally differentiated from the Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran options.[15] And, it is this critical feature that eventually becomes not merely the litmus test for Anabaptist doctrine (as it was for Horsch and Bender) but the determinative and pregnant center around which Anabaptist theology is to be constructed.

Highlighting these critical features of Bender's distilled vision of Anabaptism helpfully illuminates how mid-twentieth century Mennonites could see themselves as earnest Christians, standing firmly and uniquely within the broad Reformation tradition, and perhaps even as displaying the culmination of the Reformation. Stayer was, however, less than sympathetic with the historical vision sketched by Bender—he quipped that, by the 1960s, "The Mennonite scholars who did not move from church history to theology became less dogmatic in their expectations of what was to be found in Anabaptist history."[16] What he meant is that, upon further examination, Bender's vision of a unified and normative Anabaptism became virtually impossible to support historically. But, in Mennonite theology, this idea of a distilled core of Anabaptism took root and flourished.

II. Yoder's Further Political Distillation of Anabaptism

Yoder had a rather volatile relationship with Bender—on one hand, he was deeply indebted to Bender's understanding of Anabaptism; on the other hand, he was sharply critical of Bender's role in the entrenchment of Mennonite denominationalism which, to Yoder, seemed like institutionalizing and therefore watering down the reforming impulses of Anabaptism.[17] Yet, within a few decades, Yoder became his own form of "Mr. Mennonite" both to those within and to those external to the Mennonite world—his *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) popularly and academically legitimated a

form of Anabaptist theological ethics.[18] The influence garnered through this text supplemented and sometimes superseded the influence he exercised through his teaching and administrative duties at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and at the University of Notre Dame, and through the many roles he played with the Mennonite Central Committee, the Mennonite Board of Missions, the Mennonite Historical Society, the Society of Christian Ethics, and so on.

In short, Yoder also affirmed the anthropocentric focus of Anabaptism that emerged in Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*, but he developed the distillation trajectory in the direction of simplification. Or, to restate, Yoder discovered a way to group the three elements noted by Bender—discipleship, the voluntary church, and nonresistance—under one umbrella: politics. In choosing this term, however, Yoder did not merely mean the art or science or activities of governing, the definition that has found its way into every dictionary in one form or another. Rather, his understanding is thicker; taking his cue from the Greek term—*polis* meaning "city"—he states that "Anything is political which deals with how people live together in organized ways," including such things as how decisions are made, how work is organized, and who controls land and freedom.[19] When speaking of the politics of Christianity, he usually refers to something like "a social style characterized by the creation of a new community,"[20] or "the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them."[21] The three elements Bender highlighted feature prominently in Yoder's thought, and even a cursory glance at his book titles illuminates his persistent attempt to incorporate these elements methodologically into a more focused concern for developing an appropriate Christian politics. For example, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (1964)[22] argues that discipleship can and should be defined as a form of politics; *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) argues that nonviolence and discipleship characterize the form of politics displayed and demanded by Jesus; and *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (1991)[23] demonstrates that the political practices of the voluntary church—e.g. baptism, communion, and communal discernment—necessarily assume discipleship and nonviolence.[24] In sum, there are a variety of particular practices that can express Yoder's politics, yet these practices are governed by the single basic principle that determines or serves as the criterion of what counts as true Christian politics (which is also the deep logic in the nature of things).[25] This single principle is diversely stated as "servanthood

replaces dominion,"[26] or "the cure for evil is suffering,"[27] or the Lamb who was slain is therefore worthy to receive power,[28] or most succinctly, "weakness wins."[29]

In sum, the distillation trajectory takes two significant steps through the work of Yoder: (1) Yoder distills Bender's three major emphases into a one concrete concept—politics—and, (2) he qualifies the practice of true politics with one single foundational principle—"weakness wins"—that (i) is displayed and demanded by Jesus and (ii) is the grain of the universe. There is no doubt that Yoder's own thought was deeply indebted to all kinds of Anabaptist texts and contexts. Yet, by distilling Christian existence into politics in this way, the politics of Jesus are no longer self-consciously dependent on any reference to historical Anabaptism or Anabaptist vision. And, it is also theoretically (and practically) possible for the astute to discern the grain of the universe without knowledge of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Yoder's political distillation of Anabaptism can be borrowed by others with an interest in his particular politics without the baggage of Anabaptist or Mennonite (or Christian) theology. Or, as often happens, these particular politics are simply identified as Anabaptism with no remainder, which makes it possible for people to employ Anabaptism to utilitarian or pragmatic political ends. These people may then refer to themselves as Anabaptist-oriented, Anabaptist-influenced, or hyphenated Anabaptists (for example, Anabaptist-Methodists—people with Methodist theological convictions and pacifist politics).[30]

That said, as thin as Yoder's account of Anabaptism may end up being—and by "thin" I mean that it effectively distills the complex richness of sixteenth-century Anabaptism into a single principle—there is one further step that takes this trajectory beyond the need to look back and draw from the broader theological scope of the Anabaptist tradition. This final step is represented well by the work of J. Denny Weaver.

III. Weaver's Revision of Anabaptism

J. Denny Weaver spent more than thirty years teaching at Bluffton College in Bluffton, Ohio. He has passionately and self-consciously argued out of the legacy of Yoder with sufficient energy to garner an increasingly large and influential audience, both within and external to the Mennonite world. He is perhaps most recognized for his book on *The Nonviolent Atonement*,[31] which recently has been supplemented by an extension of the argument in

The Nonviolent God.[32] Weaver has never had the institutional influence in the Mennonite world common to both Bender and Yoder, yet he is the only one of the three to have a school mascot named in his honor—J. Denny Beaver, Bluffton's new mascot as of 2010.

J. Denny Weaver's importance for this narrative, however, lies in his continuation of the distillation trajectory, as it is Weaver who provides the methodological way forward to make explicit dependence upon Anabaptist and Mennonite theology finally superfluous. He does so by adopting Yoder's basic principle for politics—succinctly stated as "weakness wins"—and equating it with normative nonviolence. Moving against the current critical appraisals of Yoder in light of revelations concerning his systemic and rationalized harassment and abuse of women over the course of several decades,[33] Weaver has very recently edited *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian*, a volume almost unapologetically endorsing Yoder's theological agenda.[34] In this volume, Weaver's voice is so closely identified with Yoder's that Weaver himself may not even be aware that he is moving beyond Yoder in elevating the normative role of nonviolence.

That said, Weaver's advance is not as simple as it sounds; for Weaver, this allegedly simple advance entails two steps: (1) the recognition and reception of the fact that nonviolence has "generally become separated from theological abstractions," that is, from Christian theology that was shaped in concert with medieval crusades, warrior popes, slavery, colonialism, corporal punishment, and so on;[35] and (2) the demand to rewrite all theology—perhaps even contra both sixteenth-century Anabaptist and classical or traditional Christian claims—in the service of nonviolence.[36] Much of Weaver's work has concentrated on rethinking the concept of atonement, and Ted Grimsrud has recently followed Weaver down a very similar path.[37] Yet, for Weaver, nonviolence has become the "intrinsic and integrating principle" by which all theology—and the entirety of the curriculum of Christian colleges, for that matter—ought to be written.[38] Rather than nonviolence serving as a litmus test, Weaver ambitiously believes that it is possible to recreate a theology "specific to Jesus"[39] or a theology that is specific to "Jesus' rejection of violence."[40] That is, of course, to acknowledge that reference to "the Jesus of the New Testament,"[41] remains important to Weaver because the story of Jesus functions as a sort of "foundational narrative."[42] But, perhaps more accurately, this reference to the narrative of Jesus is a type of nineteenth-century historical-critical coded reference to the "humanness of Jesus"[43]

that simply passes over miracles, acts of healing, casting out demons, preaching, praying, and anything else that might detract from "the root" to which Weaver wants to loop back: Jesus's nonviolence.[44] Weaver swiftly equates the significance and work of Jesus with Jesus's rejection of violence alone and, on this condition, then launches an attempt to rewrite Christian theology in its entirety under the rule of this single criterion. It is not hard to note how Weaver, in his own way, performs the classic anthropocentric practice of looking into the well of the biblical text and seeing a reflection of himself. Or, to shift metaphors, now that Mennonite theology has finally distilled the determinative principle of nonviolence as the sole seminal aim of its constructive agenda, the textual, theological, and historical ladder that it climbed for the last four centuries can be decisively kicked away.

It is yet unclear where the distillation trajectory might go beyond Weaver; what is very clear is that what began as an attempt to distill and succinctly describe Anabaptism for Mennonites searching a solid identity in the middle of the twentieth century has ended up losing its identity as either Anabaptist or Mennonite. For those simply looking for an affirmation and endorsement of nonviolence, this might even be considered a good thing. The fact remains, however, that by the end of this distillation process, Mennonite theology has either (a) elided any self-reflexive need to justify itself with reference to its own richly diverse historical, theological, or ecclesial setting,[45] or (b) identified itself as merely "nonviolent theology," which amounts to the same thing.

IV. Concluding Reflections on Mennonites and the Distillation Trajectory

To state the obvious, the distillation trajectory described above does not occur in a vacuum, both historically and in the present. I conclude, therefore, with three reflections on its place within and ramifications for Mennonite theology.

A. There is no doubt that Mennonites will continue to do theology. What is doubtful is what the idiom "Mennonite theology" means when this is the case. Since the publication of Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*, other strands of theological reflection within the Mennonite world have stood alongside (and perhaps occasionally in competition with) the distillation narrative sketched above. One strand of Mennonite thought, best represented by Gordon Kaufman,[46] argued for a form of religious naturalism in which God is a non-personal, creative mystery. Although attractive because (a)

it refused to image God as oppressive and controlling, and (b) it suggested a form of nonviolent existence rooted in mutual creativity, it is easy to see how the distillation trajectory might reject this view (even if ironically in retrospect): it elides Anabaptist—and Christian—theological uniqueness. A second strand of Mennonite thought worked in the opposite direction, namely, in the direction of self-understanding within the broader context of the Christian tradition. This strand, represented well by A. James Reimer,[47] argued that Mennonites ought not to think of themselves as developing an "alternative theology" but rather ought to situate themselves "at the centre of classical Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy."[48] For the distillation trajectory, this orthodoxy-oriented strand is fundamentally flawed because it surrenders the primacy of its Anabaptist specificity to what has often amounted to be a theological discourse antithetical to Anabaptist convictions, a discourse that has been complicit in centuries of violence, colonization, and imperialism. Finally, a third strand, perhaps best exemplified by J. Lawrence Burkholder,[49] argued that although the Anabaptist peace position is admirable and paradigmatic, there are complex or ambiguous dilemmas in life where tragic necessity may be required. For Burkholder, this was not an open embrace of violence, but it is easy to see why the distillation trajectory, which always ties nonviolence to Anabaptist identity in some manner, would resist this apparent triumph of Niebuhrian realism. There are yet other competing strands in the Mennonite world,[50] but this brief summary should be sufficient to indicate (a) the hotly contested nature of Mennonite identity and theology in the last decades of the twentieth century, (b) the impetus to clarify what, exactly, counts as "true Mennonite theology," and (c) why appealing to a version of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist legacy against the seeming confusion in twentieth-century Mennonite theology seemed like a very logical move. Harold Bender was the first to popularize this move and he thereby served as the primary instigator of the current manifestation of the distillation trajectory.

B. The temptation to distill Anabaptism—even if initially for heuristic purposes—has become deeply entrenched and remains powerfully pervasive even for those that would not overtly endorse the distillation trajectory outlined above. For example, Keith Graber Miller begins his recent entry on "Anabaptist Ethics" in *The Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* as follows: "Christian discipleship, peacemaking, community, integrity, and fidelity to Scripture have been the core of Anabaptist ethics for the past five centuries."[51] These features at the "core" are somewhat different

from what he describes as the concerns that were centrally important to many early Anabaptist leaders: autonomy of the church from the state in matters of worship and practice, the necessity of voluntary adult baptism, the separation of Christians from the realm of politics, and the rejection of "the sword."[52] Yet, it is clear that the long-standing and generally-assumed "core" listed above supersedes any sense of Anabaptist primitivism because Miller's analysis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is largely superficial (using only three primary texts to justify his assessment, namely, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*,[53] the seventeenth-century *Martyrs Mirror*,[54] and Walter Klaassen's *Anabaptism in Outline*,[55] a late twentieth-century edited compilation that goes out of its way to display the non-unanimity of Anabaptism on allegedly core issues, including nonresistance[56]). With confidence, however, Graber Miller concludes his description of Anabaptist ethics assuming the possible and, in fact, actual separation of Anabaptist "themes" and "convictions" from their historical, theological, and ecclesial location:

> It is quite possible that as Anabaptist themes are embraced by broader Christian thinkers and communities such as Stanley Hauerwas, Sojourners, and the "emergent church" movement, these people, publications, and bodies of believers will carry forward important Anabaptist convictions as much or more so than do many of the ethnic institutional Anabaptist churches.[57]

Or, in short, Miller's vision of Anabaptism has become a distillation of the tradition that can now stand apart from that same tradition.

Considering one further example of contemporary distillation reveals the restless predicament entailed in embracing this trajectory. Stuart Murray, in *The Naked Anabaptist*, lists what he takes to be the seven "Anabaptist Core Convictions." Paraphrased in brief, these are:

1) The conviction that Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer, and Lord, the central point of reference for all of life; Anabaptists are committed to following him as well as worshipping him.

2) The conviction that Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation and therefore serves as the center for approaching the Bible and community.

3) The rejection of standard Christendom assumptions because they distort the gospel.

4) The conviction that association with wealth, status, and power is inappropriate for followers of Jesus.

5) The conviction that the church is called to be a committed community of discipleship, mission, and worship in search of God's kingdom.

6) The conviction that spirituality and economics are connected and Anabaptists are committed to seeking justice.

7) The conviction that peace is at the heart of the gospel and that Anabaptists are committed to peacemaking.[58]

Murray claims that the above convictions "say nothing at all about foundational theological subjects such as the Trinity, atonement, or eschatology," that they are not intended to be comprehensive (let along exhaustive), and that they are not intended to substitute for or undermine creeds or statements of faith.[59] This may be the case, but it is hard to imagine how, since they are meant to encapsulate the "essence" of Anabaptism, these convictions do not undermine the value or need for further conversation about foundational theological subjects. Methodologically, the convictions are certainly not drawn from sixteenth-century Anabaptism, although Murray does come around to summarizing the history of the original Anabaptists in the penultimate chapter of the book.[60] Yet, these convictions summarize, at least according to the book's subtitle, "the bare essentials of a radical faith."

Stepping back and viewing the positions of both Miller and Murray, it is clear that virtually all of their distilled convictions are anthropocentric and ethically focused; their distilled descriptions seem to assume some sort of broader theological context; their descriptions leave that broader theological context undeveloped, thereby assuming its secondary importance (at best) among Anabaptists; and all of these descriptions suggest a possible (and perhaps even probable) disconnect between Mennonite churches today and the respective depictions of Anabaptism. That noted, the reader is then forced to wrestle with several pressing questions that have continued to drive the distillation in the direction that Yoder and then Weaver have taken. For example: Which set of "core convictions," "principles," "themes," or "major points of emphasis" is really accurate, and by what criteria would one make that judgment? How are these to be related or integrated? Or, does one have to affirm all, a majority, or just the most important of the "core convictions" to be Anabaptist?[61] Yoder and Weaver wrestled with these questions after Bender, first providing an organizing

principle (Yoder) and then, pressing further, a sole practical criteria that stands behind and authorizes all constructive and normative claims (Weaver).

C. As indicated in the above reflections, the search for Mennonite identity is as existentially alive today as it was in the middle of the twentieth century. But, Anabaptist theology in the distillation trajectory has come a long way in the past seventy years. Acknowledging the limitations of the succinct summary offered above, a few final critical comments based on the skeletal form of the above argument are in order.

First, it should come as no surprise that Yoder's and Weaver's writings have been appreciated by "anyone anywhere who seeks to follow the way of peace with mind as well as body," to borrow a phrase from Weaver.[62] As it turns out, what Weaver ends up offering is an affirmation of nonviolence that can be employed without the other superfluous theological baggage of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, or any other form of Christianity. In fact, one is essentially free to write whatever theology one wants as long as it does not contradict the universal normative consequences of the gospel narrative of Jesus's rejection of violence. On this basis, Weaver has selectively interacted with black, feminist, and womanist theology. But, his affirmation and appropriation of these traditions is, as one might suspect, also limited and guided by the criterion of nonviolence.[63]

Second, it also seems clear that Bender would hardly recognize Weaver's theology as Anabaptist, and Weaver himself acknowledges that his theologizing is well beyond what Anabaptists were writing in the sixteenth century (even if Weaver believes his work stands, or at least could stand, in continuity with them).[64] On this matter, I think it is unfortunate that his exceedingly narrow methodological circularity does not allow him to take seriously the prospect that nonviolence need not be in conflict with the "classic creeds" (perhaps nonviolence is the best expression of the classic creeds?) or that there is a profound diversity within "Christendom's theology" greater than that found within the Anabaptist tradition, a diversity that may provide him with richer resources than present in his reconstructed theology. After all, it appears that many sixteenth-century Anabaptists came to their conclusions concerning the sword not merely despite but frequently because of the theology and Scripture that was passed on to them through Christendom.

Third, it is unclear whether Weaver himself grasps the radical nature of his own methodological claims. After all, if he is willing to delegitimize and reinscribe all theology formed and affirmed under the hegemonic purview of what he calls Constantinian Christianity,

it seems difficult to understand how he can have such a high view of Scripture, for it is the "Jesus of the New Testament" that provides leverage against subsequent theological developments. This challenge presses in two directions. In one direction, it is Constantinian Christianity that "finalized" and passed down the biblical canon. But, if the integrity and authority of the canon is rejected in the same manner as the theological claims finalized and passed down by the same Constantinian church (including but not limited to the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian formula), it remains unclear who or what grants the scriptural Jesus the authority he holds for Weaver. Further, and related, Weaver's own methodological convictions should lead him to view the content of the Bible as subject to revision according to the same practical criterion he holds for adjudicating Christian theology. His response might be that his reading is merely an appropriately strong Christological (or perhaps Jesulogical) reading of the canon, but then he is forced back to the question of how Christology (or even the humanness of Jesus) gains this sort of authority apart from mere theological intuitionism. As Weaver continues to unfold his own position, it is my hope that answers to these questions will become clear in the years to come.

Notes

1. More will be said about competing Mennonite theological trajectories at the conclusion of this essay.
2. This is the (rather pejorative) term John Howard Yoder used to refer to early twentieth-century Mennonite leaders. See John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in *Consultation on Anabaptist Mennonite Theology: Papers Read at the 1969 Aspen Conference*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 11.
3. Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944). In this context, I draw solely upon Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*, not because this text sufficiently represents the complexity of Bender's own thought but simply because the text itself has taken on a life of its own irrespective of its author's intentions.
4. Bender, *Anabaptist Vision*, 3.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Ibid., 20. The terms listed here that Bender used to capture what he was driving at appear on page 20 with the exceptions of "elements" (26 and 31) and "principles" (28 and 32).
7. Ibid., 11.
8. See James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972), 10.
9. Bender, *Anabaptist Vision*, 33. It might be argued that Bender's affirmation of the importance of "following Christ" makes his Anabaptism

Christocentric and not anthropocentric, as I have suggested. In a sense, I am sympathetic to that argument. However, what I think makes the description anthropocentric, at the end of the day, is that it is defined by what humans do and not what God does: Bender's description is rooted in and defined by our responsive actions and not God's initiating actions, which may be latent in the background but certainly not central to his overt description. That said, it is almost unimaginable that Bender could have separated the actions entailed in following Christ from a relationship with Christ (though his opening descriptions of "secularized" forms of Anabaptist Christianity might suggest otherwise); it is not unimaginable for Bender's heirs to separate these particular actions from a relationship with Christ.

[10] *The Schleitheim Confession* is an exception on this matter, even though it functions, at least for Yoder, as the bridge between the early Anabaptists in Zurich and the second generation of Anabaptists. See John Howard Yoder, trans. and ed., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 7. Or, to refer back to Bender's historical summary above, *Schleitheim* appears in 1527, that is, between 1525 (the origins in Zurich) and 1533 (the establishment in the Low Countries). Understood as a bridge, *The Schleitheim Confession*—with its pragmatic emphases—must then be inordinately valued. Yet, in comparison to later confessions, the absence of explicit theological framing in *Schleitheim* is anomalous.

[11] See his description of "a new ethic of love and nonresistance." Bender, *Anabaptist Vision*, 20.

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 32.

[15] See, for example, Bender, *Anabaptist Vision*, 34-35.

[16] Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 19. For a preliminary introduction to the historical debate about the relationship between theological convictions and Anabaptist historiography, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (*MQR*) 53 (1979): 177-188; Cater Lindberg, "*Fides et Intellectus ex Auditu*: A Response to Hans-Jürgen Goertz on 'History and Theology'," *MQR* 53 (1979): 198-192; John S. Oyer, "Goertz's 'History and Theology': A Response," *MQR* 53 (1979): 192-197; William Klassen, "History and Theology: Some Reflections on the Present Status of Anabaptist Studies," *MQR* 53 (1979): 197-200; Kenneth R. Davis, "Vision and Revision in Anabaptist Historiography: Perceptional Tensions in a Broadening Synthesis or Alien Idealization?" *MQR* 53 (1979): 200-208; Werner O. Packull, "A Response to 'History and Theology': A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today," *MQR* 53 (1979): 208-211; and James M. Stayer, "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend," *MQR* 53 (1979): 211-218.

[17] See Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 14-20.

[18] It is worth noting, however, that Yoder was quite touchy about pigeonholing *The Politics of Jesus* as a Mennonite text. He later noted "My book was unrepresentative of Mennonites not only in the superficial sense that I used the word 'politics' in a way which Mennonites eschewed, but also at

numerous points within the substance of the study." See John Howard Yoder, *To Hear The Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 48 n30.

[19] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 223.

[20] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (2nd ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 242.

[21] John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 28.

[22] See John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003).

[23] See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992).

[24] For a further development of this relationship, see Paul Martens, *The Heterodox Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

[25] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 79.

[26] Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 131.

[27] John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence - A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 21.

[28] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 35. This statement is also expressed as "Our Lamb has conquered" in *The Politics of Jesus* (242).

[29] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 35.

[30] See this sentiment expressed overtly in Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 172.

[31] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

[32] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[33] See, for example, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89.1 (2015) which is entirely devoted to this topic.

[34] See J. Denny Weaver, ed., *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

[35] J. Denny Weaver, "Violence in Christian Theology," in *Teaching Peace: Nonviolence in the Liberal Arts*, ed. J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 39-40. In this critical element of his project, Weaver shows great affection for and affinity with black, feminist, and womanist theologies. See, for example, J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 121-142.

[36] To use Weaver's terms: "To maintain itself as a peace church, the contemporary peace church can, in fact must, move to express a theology that specifically reflects and articulates the nonviolence that is intrinsic to the story of Jesus that we find in the New Testament." *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 119.

[37] See Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

[38] See Weaver, "Violence in Christian Theology," 51.

[39] Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 7.

[40] J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 121.

[41] Weaver, *John Howard Yoder*, 21.

[42] Ibid., 20.

[43] For Weaver, it is this emphasis in Yoder that he appropriates and takes to its logical conclusion. See Weaver, *John Howard Yoder*, 75.

[44] It is for this reason that, contrary to Weaver, Yoder's attempt to develop theology and ethics "specific to Jesus" is precisely the site of what, for lack of a better term, I have called his heterodoxy. Or, to restate, it is not that I reject the assertion that Yoder's theological ethics were attempting to be "specific to Jesus"; I simply argue that what Yoder (and by extension Weaver) mean by "specific to Jesus" is already profoundly conditioned by a preceding exercise of practical reasoning which determines the available theological and ethical options. See Weaver, *John Howard Yoder*, 79 n.150.

[45] Weaver, unlike Bender and Yoder, rejects the possibility of finding a single normative strand of Anabaptist theology in history. He states, "One cannot very well cite the Anabaptist theological perspective when there is not one normative Anabaptist movement" (*Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 24). On the other hand, his *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997) does attempt to draw upon Mennonite history for normative ends. It is important to note that Weaver did not begin his constructive project naively—early in his career, he worked through the history of Mennonite historiography before developing his constructive agenda. See J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

[46] Gordon Kaufman's best-known works are *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985); and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[47] A classic text that represents this trajectory is A. James Reimer's *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

[48] Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 15.

[49] See, for example, J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993).

[50] For discussions of various approaches to doing Anabaptist and Mennonite theology, see Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 57-93; David C. Cramer, "Mennonite Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," *Conrad Grebel Review* 31 (2013): 255-73.

[51] Keith Graber Miller, "Anabaptist Ethics," in *The Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 62.

[52] Miller, "Anabaptist Ethics," 62.

[53] Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956).

[54] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

[55] Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981).

[56] See Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 11.

[57] Miller, “Anabaptist Ethics,” 65. And, it almost goes without saying, but it is clear that “ethnic institutional” (a) refers to Mennonite churches and (b) is not a value-free description.

[58] See Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist,* 45-46.

[59] Ibid., 46.

[60] See Ibid., 135-159.

[61] Murray preemptively addresses this issue by suggesting that Anabaptists uniquely and holistically affirm all of the “core convictions” and that is what makes them “Anabaptist” (47). If this is the case, the question of precisely what constitutes the “core convictions” is especially important.

[62] J. Denny Weaver, “Violence in Christian Theology,” 51.

[63] See, for example, J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 121-142, and *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 99-178.

[64] See Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 116.