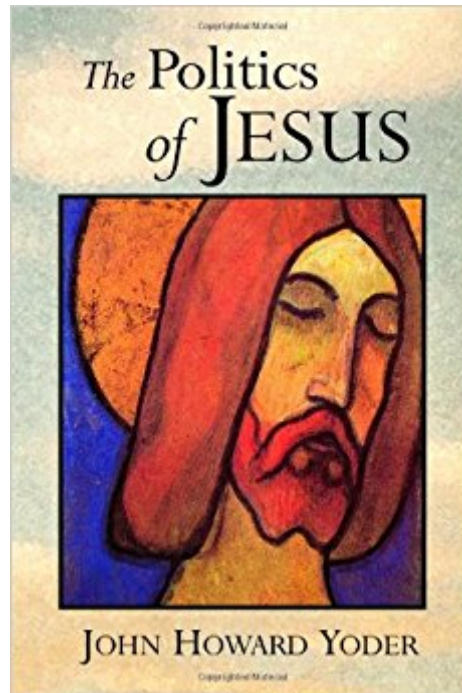




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# The Politics Of Jesus



## Synopsis

Tradition has painted a portrait of a Savior aloof from governmental concerns and whose teachings point to an apolitical life for his disciples. How, then, are we to respond today to a world so thoroughly entrenched in national and international affairs? But such a picture of Jesus is far from accurate, argues John Howard Yoder. Using the texts of the New Testament, Yoder critically examines the traditional portrait of Jesus as an apolitical figure and attempts to clarify the true impact of Jesus' life, work, and teachings on his disciples' social behavior. The book first surveys the multiple ways the image of an apolitical Jesus has been propagated, then canvasses the Gospel narrative to reveal how Jesus is rightly portrayed as a thinker and leader immediately concerned with the agenda of politics and the related issues of power, status, and right relations. Selected passages from the epistles corroborate a Savior deeply concerned with social, political, and moral issues. In this thorough revision of his acclaimed 1972 text, Yoder provides updated interaction with publications touching on this subject. Following most of the chapters are new "epilogues" that summarize research conducted during the last two decades -- research that continues to support the insights set forth in Yoder's original work. Currently a standard in many college and seminary ethics courses, *The Politics of Jesus* is also an excellent resource for the general reader desiring to understand Christ's response to the world of politics and his will for those who would follow him.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Christianity Today, [Top 10 Books of the 20th Century](#) (2000) Stanley Hauwerwas in

Christian Century "I am convinced that when Christians look back on this century of theology in America, *The Politics of Jesus* will be seen as a new beginning." Dennis P. McCann "When it was first published, *The Politics of Jesus* effected a coup de grace against neo-orthodox biblical theologies that had managed to depoliticize the ethical significance of Jesus' message. This second edition is no less provocative in contesting the reevaluations of New Testament ethics emerging from recent scholarship on the historical Jesus. Yoder presses beyond the question of whether Jesus was political to ask what sort of politics is the mark of Christian discipleship." Max L. Stackhouse "Although most Catholics, Calvinists, and Christian realists will remain skeptical of Yoder's view of Jesus and of politics, we are always challenged by him. This new edition includes acute responses to many critics. It will keep the discussion vibrant as Christians today decide how to engage our emerging cosmopolitan, global civilization."

Tradition has painted a portrait of a Savior who stands aloof from governmental concerns and who calls his disciples to an apolitical life. But such a picture of Jesus is far from accurate, according to John Howard Yoder. This watershed work in New Testament ethics leads us to a Savior who was deeply concerned with the agenda of politics and the related issues of power, status, and right relations. By canvassing Luke's Gospel, Yoder argues convincingly that the true impact of Jesus' life and ministry on his disciples' social behavior points to a specific kind of Christian pacifism in which "the cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy". This second edition of *The Politics of Jesus* provides up-to-date interaction with recent publications that touch on Yoder's timely topic. Following most of the chapters are new "epilogues" summarizing research conducted during the last two decades - research that continues to support the outstanding insights set forth in Yoder's original work.

John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* is a classic of 20th century American theological thought. Within the text, Yoder seeks to demonstrate how the life of Jesus was one that was involved in the politics of the day. Moving step by step, Yoder systematically shows that the idea of an apolitical Jesus who was unconcerned with the institutions and situations of this present world is false and not found in the Biblical narrative. He begins his work by summarizing the basic position of many scholars that Jesus' ethic cannot be normative for Christians. While he points out six incorrect views of Jesus' ethic, the one that receives the most attention throughout the book is the view purported by Albert Schweitzer, that of an interim ethic that is not valid because Jesus thought that the world would end soon. Yoder then begins to demonstrate his claim of a political Jesus by

moving into a survey of the Gospel of Luke. He highlights key points within the text that seek to show that Jesus was not only not an apolitical figure, but that his primary goal during his ministry, death, and resurrection was a reconstruction of the social order. A particular point of Yoder's is that Jesus was trying to reinstitute the year of Jubilee, the year in the Israelite nation where debts are remitted, slaves are set free, and the land is allowed to be fallow so that it can heal. Yoder then makes an excursus of sorts for two chapters, analyzing how God is the one who fights for Israel in the Old Testament and that there were instances of successful non-violent resistance in the 1st Century Mediterranean world among the Jews. This is done of course to show how neither the Old Testament nor the contemporary world of Jesus would contradict his teachings on pacifism. Yoder then moves to addressing key misunderstandings that Christians often have when looking at Jesus' life. He argues for a balance to be struck, saying that it is wrong for the social ethic to be ignored in favor of a personal morality. In chapter 7 Yoder moves away from the gospel narrative to the apostolic witness within the New Testament, showing how the apostles felt that the Christian life and ethic was best demonstrated in the life of Christ. The following chapter is how Christ dealt with the stoichea or powers in his death and resurrection, resulting in a view that is quite similar to Gustaf Aulen's Christus Victor. He then makes the claim that the gospel message was one that promoted equality and frames the *Haustafeln* or "household precepts" around that. He then logically proceeds to Romans 13 and argues that the Christian should be subject to the state, but that does not mean the Christian must do everything the state requires. He then addresses justification by grace and argues that it was primarily the restoration or reconciliation of individuals. His final chapter addresses the eschaton and how Christians should be living in light of it. We should accept powerlessness as Christ accepted powerlessness, because He has already conquered and will return to finish what was started. It is quite evident that Yoder sits firmly in the Anabaptist tradition and is at home with Menno Simons as well as early church figures such as Tertullian and Origen. He stands in opposition to many of his earlier contemporaries from the 19th and 20th centuries. You do not find the postmillennial-type hope of Rauschenbusch or Abbott--the world is sinful according to Yoder and this will not change until the Second Advent. There is also, however, a direct challenge to the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, who claimed that precisely because the world is sinful the ethic of Jesus will never be realized. This too is false according to Yoder, as we are supposed to be faithful to our calling and identity. The logical progression of the text is to establish Christ and then establish how we should act. The majority of his scriptural references come from either the Gospel of Luke or the Epistolary literature. He does make reference briefly to both Romans 13 and parts of the Old Testament, but by and large he focuses primarily upon Jesus and the apostolic thought that deals

with him. While the book as a whole is a success, there are some problems with the text. The biggest problem by and large is Yoder's methodology. He is inconsistent in his application of Biblical texts, primarily the Old Testament. He cannot argue for a discontinuity between the Old and the New Testament without hurting his case, primarily in the fact that God fights for believers. While Yoder is correct in the Old Testament passages that he addresses, he ignores the vast body of texts from the Old Testament that deal with the establishment of the social order and warfare in a positive light. While it is true that in the Old Testament narrative God was against the establishment of the human monarchy, He still allows it and provides orderly rules. Also, there are large-scale wars present in the Old Testament that are ordered and approved of by God. Why Yoder chose to not address this is not mentioned, but it does hurt his case for pacifism. He is also over-reliant on the Gospel of Luke to make his points. He does say in his first chapter that he could make the same points outside of that particular gospel, but one must wonder why there is no direct quotations from the other portraits of Jesus in the New Testament. While he is correct in his assessment of justification through grace in part, it cannot be argued that it is primarily one of reconciliation between individuals. It is rather as the Gospel of John puts it: reconciliation between God and the World. This does not deny the social dimension that Yoder argues for, but it also addresses the personal dimension which he seems to exclude to a degree and the cosmic implications of redemption. Another point of critique is Yoder's position chapter 8, "Christ and Power". He interprets the *stoichea* in the Pauline epistles to mean only the social institutions of the world. While this is a valid and acceptable interpretation, there are many scholars who would argue that Paul did have in mind not only the social institutions of the world but the quite real demonic forces behind them as well. Neither interpretation can be directly derived from the text, but rather deals with one's hermeneutic. His interpretation of Romans 13 is somewhat of a stretch as well. While there is much to agree with about his interpretation, his positing that the sword refers not to death but restraint is not a position that can be derived from the text without some form of exegetical acrobatics. He derives his position not from the text but rather from his presuppositions and sometimes is clearly in the wrong, such as his statement that the Romans only crucified their criminals (203). The sword, like the spear, was a weapon of warfare and was an Old Testament symbol of God's judgment upon various nations, especially the ones that were annihilated in the conquest tradition of Joshua and Judges. It is not accurate to the context of the society to say that warfare and death are not in mind at all in Paul's usage of the word. While there are some points in the book that are wrong or not as strong as the author would like, the book as a whole is a success and goes great lengths to show that the ethic of Jesus is the ethic that we should have today.

What Yoder wants to do is show how Jesus is the example for New Testament (NT) ethics and therefore the Christian ethos. "I will attempt to sketch an understanding of Jesus and his ministry of which it might be said that such a Jesus would be of direct significance for social ethics" (p. 11). He argues against the understanding of Jesus's ethical teaching as either temporary (p. 5), too pastoral, too personal, too spiritual (p. 6), not practical or as not concerned with it at all (p. 7). On the back-cover, there is a quote by Stanley Hauerwas that reads as follows: "I am convinced that when Christians look back on this century of theology in America, The Politics of Jesus will be seen as a new beginning." Indeed, Yoder challenged many of us. His argumentation chapters like "God Will Fight For Us" (ch. 4) can be wanting and not fully engaged with a theological interpretation of scripture as it seems him goal. This should not detract from his basic argument that ancient people had an understanding of a God who intervenes on their behalf. Yoder does hit his stride in places like chapter ten ("Let Every Soul Be Subject") and eleven ("Justification by Grace through Faith"). In chapter ten, we see Yoder the Exegete. Moving carefully over the letter to the Romans (rightly defined as an ecclesiological letter) and especially over the thirteenth chapter. He overturns common assumptions about what is meant by "the sword" and recognition of power. This chapter is truly a must read for those interested in political theology. In chapter eleven, we see a Yoder of the New Perspective. The first edition of this text comes five years before Sanders's landmark text Paul and Palestinian Judaism. Here he argues that the "fundamental issue was that of the social form of the church" (p. 216). Paul was not, Yoder says, "preoccupied with his guilt and seeking the assurance of a gracious God; he was rather robust of conscience and untroubled about whether God was gracious or not" (p. 215). He speaks more to the point about Gentile inclusion in the proceeding paragraphs and argues quite convincingly. John Howard Yoder weighs heavy because of the way political systems have entrenched themselves in the lives of Christians. Politics and governmental systems have long been held to be the sword of God distributing wrath and justice alike and have been found to have biblical and theological justification for the most heinous of crimes imaginable. Here we have a John the Baptist, calling a people to repent and be baptized (perhaps rebaptized in the case of Yoder). Jesus then is to "have a clue to which kinds of causation, which kinds of community-building, which kinds of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos, of which we know, as Caesar does not, that Jesus is both the Word...and the Lord" (p. 246)

Very good reference / resource materiel.

I studied Christianity as an outsider, a non-believer. This book was the first glimpse of Jesus that made sense to me, and it changed the way I view both Jesus and the Bible. It made me a believer. Even more than that, it points the way toward hope for our fallen world. Yoder presents a Christology that is not only radical, but entirely practical for our modern world.

This book may not be an easy read for the average reader, but it is loaded with great material and sound scholarship, which makes his arguments and positions very strong and convincing. I would recommend this book for anyone who has a sense of social justice and hates to see religion being described as opium for the people, because Jesus' position is very revolutionary. Fr. Don Kirchner, CSSR

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