

Where Are Our Nightmares?

ANNE THIESSEN¹

At the very beginning of the expansion of the New Testament church into the Gentile world, Peter undergoes an experience that prepares him to make the cultural (and theological) jumps necessary for the expansion (Acts 10:9–16). His experience is normally referred to as a “vision.” But I have come to realize that it must have been a nightmare for him. The story bears this out, since the awfulness of the nightmare emboldens Peter to exclaim “NO!” three times to God.

Peter is not alone in his resistance to act graciously toward other cultures. We all tend to show less grace toward other cultures, especially those perceived as holding less power. This human tendency hinders healthy partnerships.

At the global summit of the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) in 2016, which focused on churches partnering in mission and prayer, two keynote speakers called upon the denomination to renounce white privilege. An audible wave of shock, and then affirmation, swept the assembly. The group recognized that the gathering itself illustrated white privilege to some degree: the seven key speakers were white males, had ethnic Mennonite last names, and held graduate degrees, mostly doctorates. Missing from the roster were women, non-whites, and oral learners without formal education, to name a few—voices from the margins.

The call was, and remains, timely. Today, when some Christians claim prosperity as a mark of God’s blessing, this call reminds us of a dark side of prosperity and the power it offers. It reminds us that the power of privilege that prosperity bestows can hinder both fellowship and partnership.

As Anabaptists have recognized, the call includes simple living, generous sharing, and openhanded hospitality. The New Testament ideal was a community where “there were no needy people among them.”² But there’s more to the

1 Anne Thiessen and her husband, Robert, work under MB Mission to apprentice and mentor missionaries, helping them set up obedience-oriented, just-in-time training for local leaders of healthy, indigenous churches. They focus chiefly on reaching the indigenous communities of southern Mexico.

2 Acts 4:34 (NLT) is quoting Deuteronomy 15:4, showing that in the new Covenant community, God finally fulfills his promises in the old Covenant. [“to the old” sounds a little unfinished here. The old what?] See Santos Yao, “Dismantling Social Barriers through Table Fellowship” *Mission to Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, eds. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 29–36. [Double-check this 2006 publication date. I can only find 2004 and 2007.]

call than an equitable distribution of wealth. Harder to see than the effects of disparity of wealth in our relationships with those of the Global South are the effects of white privilege (let the term stand for all sorts of human privilege) on congregations and leaders at the margins. Because of our white privilege, we have instituted traditions in the church that go beyond apostolic practice and hinder global partnerships. Our blindness to the equivalents of our own education and skill sets that other cultures offer keeps us from empowering people in those cultures. As a white woman without a seminary degree who has worked with the marginalized of Latin America, I find myself sometimes excluded from the work of the Church because I am a woman and sometimes included because I am a white missionary. I know what it is to hold privilege and what it is to be left out.

Anabaptists should easily recognize such a scenario where one group has the power to place its expectations on another. They were once a despised minority who refused to rely on traditional credentials for their leaders and also refused the official definition of *church* because it did not follow Christ's mandate of discipleship. In fact, in choosing adult baptism as the entry point into church, Anabaptists challenged not only the fundamental doctrine of the traditional church but also the very fabric of society, because infant baptism was how the state registered the young as new citizens.³ Anabaptists were once willing to die for their freedom to reject such traditions that undermined their obedience to Christ.

Today, the circumstances are reversed. Anabaptists have prospered in many places around the world and have had the power and resources to introduce their own customs and traditions into new cultures where they have brought the gospel. Despite good intentions, some of these traditions have been a poor fit, especially among the marginalized. This makes ICOMB's call to renounce white privilege timely and prophetic, because after decades of colonialism and triumphalism, Mennonite Brethren leaders are determined, along with many of their evangelical brethren, to lay aside power and contextualize the gospel critically.⁴

3 Alfred Neufeld, "Anabaptist Theologies of Mission: An Overview," *The Church in Mission: Perspectives of Global Mennonite Brethren on Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Victor Wiens (Abbotsford, BC: MBMission, 2015), 92. Neufeld is drawing from Goertz, *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute. Eine Rechenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2010).

4 The Lausanne Congress insisted on contextualization, echoing many mission writers including Roland Allen, Paul Hiebert, Jacob Loewen, Wilbert Shenk, Hans Kasdorf, and others. See Lausanne Movement, "The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," <http://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctc-commitment>, accessed February 1, 2018. In "Critical Contextualization," Paul Hiebert calls us to look critically at our own traditions as well as those of new cultures in the

For this reason, they now use the term *partnership* to describe organizations and institutions where they hope allies of unequal power, of different cultures and values, can work together as equals. Institutions are easy to spot, but any cooperation between disparate groups is a partnership, even if it is not formalized: when the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 sent letters out to Gentile churches in the provinces, the Jerusalem church (perceived as the seat of apostolic leadership and power) was setting guidelines for how Jews were to work alongside Gentiles, illustrating an organic partnership. The book of Acts illustrates how the partnership provided mentors for the younger Gentile churches (Barnabas in Antioch) and funding for social programs (the Gentile churches' collection for Jerusalem's famine relief). When Jacob Loewen spent his summers helping the Embera translate the Bible, theirs was a partnership between a highly literate academic and people from an oral culture. When immigrants start churches among Americans, these are partnerships between people from different cultural backgrounds. Anyone who plants churches or disciples or aids cross-culturally is forming relationships—partnerships—that reflect collaboration between people with different skill sets and resources. The institutions that result are their symbols and embodiment.

While human partnerships tend to favor the stronger partner, God initiated a different sort of partnership. We should remember that God invented partnership when he created humans. The Bible tells the story of true partnering, and we notice (1) how God hides or relinquishes power as he stoops to work with and through us, and (2) that the ultimate partnership is organic—a marriage of Christ and his church, expressed through a myriad of cultures. Jesus shines where we often fail.

In contrast, in human partnerships, those with greater privilege tend to introduce structures that work best for them. They build Bible schools and youth camps. They run organizations. They write constitutions, set up church discipline, and establish ordination requirements. Westerners have been doing this in the rest of the world for centuries, and much goodness has come from it.

But recently, we realized that these structures so familiar to us may sometimes be burdens for our partners, especially in partnerships related to church planting. For example, in southern Mexico, ordination requiring formal training creates leadership bottlenecks in oral cultures. Few communities can afford a brick-and-mortar Bible school, and even if they could, this form of training is largely unreproducible to the degree that it ignores how local leaders are appointed and trained. Constitutions brought in from the outside often inhibit native churches from serving the sacraments because of a lack of leaders qualified by partnering organizations. It was in partnership that American

light of Scripture. We learn together to submit all traditions to Christ. Hiebert, "Critical contextualization," *Missiology: An International Review* 12 (1984): 287–96.

missionaries first introduced these practices here, but their structures (whether institutional or not) reflected white privilege in the expectations they laid on their non-white partners. In other words, they used their status as missionaries to establish practice or tradition *before* engaging the non-white partners in a two-way conversation about how to lovingly obey Jesus in their own context.

I find evidence for such privilege at work in the requirements that denominations in Mexico tend to place on groups before they can be considered “churches.” These requirements often include formal credentials for ordination. Other requirements might include (1) must have twenty-five or more baptized members, (2) must own a church building, (3) must have a salaried pastor, (4) must be registered with the government. Unfortunately, not one of these requirements reflects the New Testament story.

A Hermeneutic of Obedience

How do we start a conversation around this? How do we, as partners, evaluate our practices and traditions to see which of them have reflected white privilege and hampered the development of healthy indigenous churches? I propose a criterion from the early Anabaptist movement: their hermeneutic of obedience.⁵ A hermeneutic of obedience focuses the church’s attention, within all its partnerships, on obedience to Christ rather than on formal mastery of doctrine or theology. In other words, church is defined simply as a group of people that gathers to love and obey Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Leaders are those anointed by God and accepted by the group to lead, whatever their education. To lay an outsider’s standard of education on church leaders in new or marginalized areas and then define church by whether a group has such leaders is the voice of privilege.

The study of theology will come. Self-theologizing will happen. But these are the *fruit* of obedience, not the cause. Western humanism has tempted us to mistake the order of these two, and the result is the stifling of new churches. To claim that “the lack of theological education has always meant a reduction for advancing missions”⁶—if this implies a lack of Western formal theological education—is to deny the story of the early church, of early Anabaptism, and of the power of Jesus’s words: “Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own” (Jn 7:17, NLT). Obedience comes first, as the first Anabaptists taught. When we make the

⁵ See Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 63.

⁶ Victor Walls and Victor Wiens, “Mennonite Brethren Mission to Latin America,” in *The Church in Mission: Perspectives of Global Mennonite Brethren on Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Victor Wiens (Abbotsford, BC: MBMission, 2015), 250.

knowledge of theology our standard rather than its expression through *loving obedience*, we grant privilege to those with greater access to knowledge (of one particular kind). Honoring wisdom over knowledge levels the playing field.

Jesus left no written scripture, no code of law, no structure for administration, no order of service. His “all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20, ESV) in the Great Commission is sparse, a body of general mandates in the gospels with very little detail to them. There are some forty or so commands embedded in the “all.” They can be compressed into seven, if need be, especially for new disciples just learning to follow Jesus, and old disciples, like us, who have taken detours:

- repent and believe;
- be baptized into the life of the Spirit;
- love everyone, including our enemies;
- give freely, remembering the blessedness of the poor;
- pray constantly, and be nourished by all of God’s Word;
- gather around the Lord’s Table to remember him;
- make obedient disciples.⁷

All subsequent teachings in the New Testament are inspired by these seven foundational commands of Christ (just as the Old Testament points forward to them and illustrates them), thus deriving their authority from the “all” that Christ left us. He is our supreme authority, his “all” our clarion call to action. *This—the Great Commission*—was the hermeneutic of obedience that early Anabaptists followed and that led them to break so drastically from the traditions of the official church. Alfred Neufeld insists that this mandate “is the most quoted and most radically lived and obeyed portion of Scripture” among the original Anabaptists.⁸ Today, it remains the foundation of our ministry.

I know that any of us would be appalled at an accusation that our actions have hampered obedience to Christ among our brothers and sisters in other cultures. As I said before, this reality is hard to see, because it happens often out of sight, at the margins.

In rural Peru, I worshipped in an Anabaptist church whose leader didn’t know if he had the authority to baptize or serve the Lord’s Supper. He didn’t know whether he was a “real pastor,” because he lacked “real credentials.” His congregation, lacking the requisite number of members, may not even have qualified as a church according to the group’s constitution, which was written and established by a white missionary within a few years of arriving in the country. The group there was uncertain as to what qualified as “real church.”

⁷ George Patterson and Richard Scoggins, *Church Multiplication Guide: The Miracle of Church Reproduction* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2002), 22.

⁸ Neufeld, “Anabaptist Theologies of Mission,” 86. Neufeld calls this the hermeneutic of obedience.

I did not sense they felt much freedom to challenge traditions imposed by others that inhibited the reproduction of churches and new leaders for these churches. I did not see an Anabaptist determination to practice the priesthood of all believers by extending the sacraments of the church to all congregations, regardless of whether its leaders held formal credentials.

As a movement, we lose something when the churches at the margins do not grasp this fundamental Anabaptist freedom. It signals that we have given our own (recent) traditions and requirements for training and leadership more importance than the Great Commission of Christ and the practical guidelines of Paul in Titus and 1 Timothy. It hinders the marginalized from simply obeying Jesus. It hinders them from discipling others into new, healthy congregations with indigenous leadership. What do we do about the marginalized “least of these”?

Down the street from where I used to live in a town of southern Mexico, a Me’phaa Indian came to Jesus. I would hear him singing gospel choruses when I passed his house. He had a radiant smile and greeted me joyously as “sister” whenever he saw me. He started gathering friends and family in his home to share the gospel in Me’phaa with them. The group grew. I believe that God intended this to be a Me’phaa church, the first of its kind in that town. But this brother was part of another church in town, and when the pastor in that church found out about the group, he insisted that only he, an ordained pastor, could lead it. The pastor was not Me’phaa. The meetings switched into Spanish and, after a time, died out. I hardly blame the pastor. He was dutifully following a model of leadership he had inherited. The model came from much further back, from some far away, unwitting center of “white privilege” or its Mexican equivalent.

Throughout Latin America, I have witnessed various traditions, whether introduced or local, inhibiting not only the practice of the sacraments but also prayer, forgiveness of enemies, and making disciples. In every case, these traditions, coming from some center of privilege, held more sway at the margins than the commands of Christ himself. They hindered these “margins” from becoming new “Antiochs” from where the Kingdom expands when the “Jerusalems” wane.⁹

How do we break the hold of white privilege at the margins of our movements so that congregations and their leaders have full confidence to be the

⁹ Andrew Walls argues that the Jerusalem Jews little understood that the gospel had already made what Ralph Winter calls a lateral shift away from Jerusalem to Antioch, from where the Kingdom would expand throughout the Gentile world even after Jerusalem fell (Walls, “Demographics, Power and the Gospel in the 21st Century,” *International Development from an Integrative Perspective*, ed. James Butare-Kiyovu [Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2011], 80–81).

church, reproducing new congregations and new leadership and practicing the sacraments? To bring marginalized congregations into a more complete fellowship, a more biblical organic partnership, I propose we revisit *with our partners* how we, as Anabaptists, prioritize our sources of authority in the church.

There are various sources of authority in the church, each lower one serving the higher. We get into trouble when our lowest level of authority—our cultural norms and traditions—gets passed on to other cultures and there usurps our highest authority, the commands of Christ as we find them in the gospels. In other words, we get into trouble when we bypass a hermeneutic of obedience and its radical commitment to the Great Commission.

The book of Acts narrates how the early church maintained this radical commitment. We should remember that the traditions of the devout Jews of that time were, at least in part, established by God! Torah was God's Law, and devout Jews believed that adherence to Torah would usher in the Kingdom. God had to torment Peter with a recurrent nightmare before he let go of his purity laws, and even then, later, under pressure from Judaizers, he went back to them and marginalized his Gentile brethren, refusing to eat with them. Even Barnabas, a missionary to the Gentiles, fell into this error.¹⁰

Moving into new cultures is painful, and not just for new, persecuted believers; it's painful for *us*! Where are our nightmares? Where are those sheets filled with impure animals? Where's the pain . . . for *us*? Might our "sheet" hold traditions that keep believers in other cultures from simply obeying Jesus in such things as the sacraments? Who are our Stephens challenging "Temple" worship? Might our Temple worship ignore gifted leaders who don't have traditional credentials? Where are those who insist on the priesthood of believers for those left out of current church structures—our present-day "re-baptizing" martyrs?¹¹

As Anabaptists, we honor those who rightfully challenged official tradition in the past. We are not called radicals for nothing. The hermeneutic of obedience is our heritage, as the 2016 ICOMB call proves. We should heed this call to simply obey Jesus, to place his teachings and mandates above our cherished traditions.

Before I came to work among Mixtec Indians in southern Mexico, I was part of a Honduran church-planting movement with Anabaptist values. The movement was explosive, birthing new churches all around me that were free

10 Gal 2:11–14.

11 Vincent Donovan, describing missionary work among young people in America, said: "Do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before" (Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993], vii).

to reproduce because they did not define church or leadership in the traditional way. Every new church opened with biblically chosen leaders who baptized and served Communion, and trained others to do so—through mentored discipleship, in their homes, through their own network of extension work.

But into this scenario of multiplying rural churches came ordained pastors from Tegucigalpa, the capital, who told the rural pastors that these were not real churches and that their leaders were not true pastors because the leaders did not hold degrees and they were not properly ordained. The leadership of the movement was in crisis, its confidence shaken over the issue of authority. Who decides when a gathering is a church? Who appoints leaders? Early Anabaptists would have recognized this controversy. There are always “Judaizers.”

After prayer and biblical study, the leadership team—a partnership between one white missionary and a handful of local leaders—adopted a hermeneutical tool that would give a “Jerusalem Council blessing” to the rural churches in crisis. It was an Anabaptist “hermeneutic of obedience,” insisting that Jesus held absolute authority above all others. It held that Jesus had given the church its supreme mandates in his teachings and Commission, which could be summarized in the seven acts of obedience mentioned above.

With this simple tool, the Honduran pastors could know what the “all” of the Great Commission actually was. Focused on the authority of Jesus himself, they could know that they were churches because they had gathered in Jesus’s name to joyously obey his “all that I have commanded.” They could know that their leaders were true leaders because they were shepherding the flock, leading it into loving obedience to their true authority.

Outsiders’ definitions of “church” and “pastor” held less weight. I witnessed the nonformally trained local leaders gently repulsing the “Judaizers”—who tried to undermine their authority—naming Christ’s authority as their defense. It was an unforgettable example of the hermeneutic of community empowering the marginalized so they could become true partners. And it was this community that taught us the term “church multiplication.”¹²

I believe we have much to learn from such as these who may not appear “wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy,” to quote Paul (1 Cor 1:26, NLT). If we step out of their way and encourage them to create new ways to simply obey Jesus—by discipling new leaders within an oral context, for example, or removing institutional barriers for church planting—we may see churches multiply in a way unimaginable to us now. We may see God use new culturally relevant methods in unexpectedly powerful ways. I have witnessed this happen. The Hondurans taught me how God chooses “things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful” (1 Cor 1:27, NLT).

12 See Patterson’s *Church Multiplication Guide*.

A hermeneutic of obedience helps level the playing field of power. Under Christ's rule, privilege fades in the light of mutual submission. All partners are accountable to one another as they place obedience to the teachings and mandates of Christ above any cultural practices or religious traditions.¹³

Recently, in the name of my mission agency, I gave this message to some Latin American pastors in a partner conference: "We repent of the ways that we have hindered your simple obedience to Christ. We recognize that we introduced our traditions, especially those defining church and leadership, with too great an authority, and so they kept you from sacrament as well as from spontaneous reproduction. But we release you now from any Western traditions—such as education or governance styles—that have hindered your growth. We give you freedom to obey Jesus in the way that works best in your context. We commit ourselves as partners to remain your best cheerleaders, your best prayer warriors, your best sounding board, even your best critics, anticipating with joy what God will do through you as you simply obey Jesus."

I do not know what this group of leaders will choose to change in the future. Some of them are already changing the ways they define church and reproduce leadership. But some may think it is too late or too emotionally costly to make changes to familiar structures, unwieldy as they may be. Or they may wait for the leaders of the mission agency to initiate change. Or they may feel a loyalty to the missionaries that introduced these structures.¹⁴ This is an open-ended journey that we—I, my agency, and the Latin American leaders who are our partners—share. But a legitimate conversation about power between disparate partners has begun, based on our mutual accountability to obey Jesus.

Suggestions for Applying a Hermeneutic of Obedience to Church Partnerships

- Check, in partnership, that all new churches and members are empowered to obey Jesus's "all that I have commanded," including the sacraments. Identifying the seven commands of Christ for new believers and

13 MBMission recently restructured its partnership with global partners to better reflect mutual submission. Also see Christianity Today International, CT Pastors (website), "What Christians in the US Can Learn from Immigrant Pastors," January, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2018/january-web-exclusives/what-christians-in-us-can-learn-from-immigrant-pastors.html> for examples of how Global South partners call US Christians to obedience to Christ.

14 Justo Gonzalez describes the debt of loyalty many Latin American Protestants feel toward North America, making Hispanic or indigenous contextualization more difficult (González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990]).

churches helps them focus first on his authority.¹⁵

- Revisit, in partnership, constitutions introduced by outsiders to assure an emphasis on loving obedience to Christ over Western knowledge and tradition.
- Revisit, in partnership, requirements for defining new churches and appointing new leaders in ways that falsely raise the bar above biblical requirements (those in Titus and 1 Timothy, for example).
- Check for leadership bottlenecks. Adapt pastoral training, using critical contextualization, so that theological knowledge is not a prerequisite for leadership in new churches. Adopt ways to train anointed leaders already serving, mobilizing them as obedient disciples and effective trainers in their own context, promoting self-theologizing and the unhindered reproduction of *their* leadership.¹⁶ Recognize that the lack of “properly trained leaders” is a sign of *our* failure. There is no biblical basis for blaming this on a group’s lack of resources or gifting.
- Create ways, in our summits, to listen to those who lead others into simple, loving obedience to Jesus, without reference to credentials associated with privilege. One avenue for this is to use oral storytelling as a medium for speakers.

Peter, despite his initial resistance to God’s direction for him to form healthy partnerships with the Gentiles, and despite his subsequent failures to empower them, clearly was able to move ahead with powerful results. He became a champion of God’s work among the Gentiles, second only to Paul. I sometimes wonder if Peter’s long journey from Joppa to Caesarea, along dusty byways and accompanied by three pagans, was meant to give him time to reflect on the full meaning of his nightmare. I assume he processed it with his companions. May all who engage in global partnerships, especially with the marginalized, ask God to send us our own version of Peter’s nightmare. And a journey of reflection and two-way conversations before acting.

15 In Mexico, the Assemblies of God Church recognizes four levels of credentialing, the lowest of which ordains pastors without any formal training. They are encouraged to practice the sacraments.

16 The MB extension program Priscilla & Aquila in Paraguay provides continuing education for serving pastors. Also, for ways to adapt pastoral training contextually see Tom A. Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers* (LaHabra, CA: Center for Organizational Ministry and Development, 1997); Sherwood Lingenfelter and Paul Gupta, *Breaking Tradition to Accomplish Vision: Training Leaders for a Church-Planting Movement; A Case from India* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2006); and *Diversified Theological Education: Equipping All God’s People*, ed. F. Ross Kinsler (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2011).