

# Let Us Be Reminded Who We Are and What We Are Called to Do:

## The Theological Mandate of Anabaptist Witness

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We are gathered from many nations around the globe in this meeting of Anabaptist leaders in witness and service. Who are we, and what are we called to do?

When Peter and John were first called before the authorities to answer these questions, they said, “If we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:9–12, English Standard Version).

When others of our spiritual ancestors, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists of Europe were called before the governing authorities of their day to answer these questions, they most frequently quoted two scriptures, Matthew 28:19 and 20 and Psalm 24:1. “Jesus,” they said, “told us to go to all the peoples of the world and make disciples, and the Bible is clear that the whole earth belongs to God. So we go!”

Today we can do no better than to answer these questions like Peter and John, and Hans and Michael and Dirk and Menno did. For a few minutes, let’s reflect together on their answers and ours.

The theme of the Mennonite World Conference this year is “Walking with God.” If we go to the very first chapters of the Bible, we find that theme present there. Adam walked with God. Enoch walked with God. Noah walked with God. (Gen. 3:8; 5:24; 6:9) The entire remainder of the Bible flows as an invitation to walk with God. In fact, everything we can say about being disciples of

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Jesus or being involved in mission is grounded in this simple phrase: walking with God.

Yet that old world was destroyed by a flood. And when we come to Abraham, the theme of walking with God gives way to a new expression of the same reality: I will bless you, and through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in Genesis 12:3, we find this theme of blessing for the nations repeated again and again throughout both the Old and New Testaments: 58 times in the Old Testament and 29 times in the New Testament, for a total of 87 times.

In the New Testament Peter speaks to “all the people” (Acts 3:25) after the healing of the lame beggar, and repeats the promise to Abraham. Paul, writing to the Galatians, repeats the same promise (Gal. 3:8). And, of course, Jesus trumpets the blessing to the nations in the records of the Great Commission in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts.

This blessing to the nations is described elsewhere in both Old and New Testament by *shalom*. This Hebrew word means completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, and absence of agitation or discord.<sup>3</sup> It is expressed perhaps most beautifully in the ancient priestly blessing, which I heard from the pulpit again and again in benediction as a child growing up: “The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace [*shalom*]” (Numbers 6:24–26, New King James Version).

And how does Jesus express the blessing, the *shalom*, in the Great Commission? He portrays *shalom* as essentially *walking with God*: “behold, *I am with you* all the days until the full completion of the age” (author’s translation). This blessing is quintessentially in *being and making disciples*. And what does that mean? Jesus spelled it out in two ways: (1) “baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” i.e., “fellowship formation,” creating new fellowships of believers; and (2) “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,” which commandments are summed up in the two great commandments: love for God and love for neighbor (Matthew 22:37–39).

Thus, the Great Commandment is included in the Great Commission. This combination leads us directly to the Mennonite World Conference Mission Commission and the two networks that are gathered here this week with a

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<sup>2</sup> In Genesis 12:3, the Hebrew word usually translated into English as “families” (*mishpachat*) can also be translated “clans.”

<sup>3</sup> See *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon*, entries 7965 and 7999. *Strong’s* is available online: <http://www.eliyah.com/lexicon.html>.

double focus on witness and service: the Global Mission Fellowship and the Global Anabaptist Service Network. Both witness and service are included in that great mandate of Jesus to go and bless the nations. This is who we are and what we do.

We stand in the great train of witnesses and servants of Jesus since Pentecost. In the New Testament's final statement of the Great Commission, in Acts 1:8, Jesus gives the key to power: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. "You will receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you...." Here the images of (a) walking with God and (b) blessing for all the peoples of the world are complemented by another image, the indwelling Holy Spirit. We become partners with God in the most intimate way imaginable. God dwells within us. But how do we see this dwelling in its practical expression?

The great European revival of the sixteenth century touched every part of the church: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist. Luther stressed justification by faith, belief, assent, reception; Anabaptists stressed an active faith, discipleship, following Christ in life, coupled with a missionary spirit; St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (1539), preached evangelistically to nuns in Spain and was almost killed by angry townsmen who no longer had access to the nun's bedrooms after their conversion.

The great re-embrace of the Holy Spirit in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has had a global impact—"the age of the Spirit," some call it.<sup>4</sup> But I would observe that the followers of Jesus have always lived in the age of the Spirit—God powerfully acting within and among us, motivating us in a mission which is a blend of word, deed, and being. We stand together today to confess that the mission is God's. Scholars, still liking to use Latin sometimes, call it the *missio Dei*.

Further, we confess that God has wooed us into partnership with him in this mission, as we see with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). It is a mission of word, so we speak. It is a mission of deed, so we serve in all kinds of ways. It is a mission of being, so we are present in the name and Spirit of Jesus. It is a mission in which we all have gifts to share.

One of the most attractive expressions of God's mission I have recently seen was in Shirati, Tanzania, while visiting a dear friend, Bishop John Nyagwegwe. He told me about their earlier temptation to look westward at times of need, or even at times of routine maintenance. But then they began to look in a new way beyond the West, to God. They gave up even what they were "entitled"

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1995).

to. In a new way they sought God earnestly in prayer for his provision. God answered! For some years they struggled, but then they began to build and expand. The women's fellowship renovated old buildings for a new technical school that they desperately needed. A Tanzanian businessman chipped in. A Canadian traveler stopped by. A Dutch engineer offered his help. German Mennonites joined hands. New buildings rose. Today the school is on the verge of opening. At the same time, the young adults of the church began to gather for encouragement, prayer, and worship. Over the summer of 2015 thousands were expected to gather for another time of mobilizing fellowship. The initiative is not coming from the West or even from local church leadership. New fellowships are rising in nearby unreached communities, where people of another faith are welcoming them with open arms, even helping them build a meeting place.

The Tanzanians say: "We are watching God work, and we are working!"

Witness, service, and our very being—all in interdependent fellowship and partnership with God, one another, and with other brothers and sisters around the globe.