

## A Narrow Gate? Proceeding along the Way of Jesus by the Spirit

NANCY ELIZABETH BEDFORD\*

*Abstract.* As we commemorate the 500-year anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, we need to face the fact that the white Jesus worshipped in many churches in the United States today is scarcely recognizable as Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christian faith confesses as the incarnation of the Son of God. The toxic white Jesus of many Protestants—be they “liberal” or “conservative”—seems to be, rather, a child of white nationalism. This essay explores two elements in Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective that might help in resisting the distortions of a toxic Christology: the “wide narrowness” of the way of Jesus and the continuing work of the Spirit in opening up space for justice and mercy.

I spent a lot of time during 2017 thinking and talking about 1517 and the 500 years of the Magisterial Reformation. The year 2017 also initiated a decade of reflection among Anabaptists since 1527 was a pivotal year in their history as well. Thus, 2027 will mark 500 years since the writing of the Schleitheim Confession, the executions of Felix Mantz by drowning in Zürich, Michael Sattler being burned at the stake, and Margaretha Sattler being drowned in Rottenburg, as well as the deaths of Hans Hut in an Augsburg prison and Hans Denck of the plague in Basel. The year 2027 will also be the 500-year anniversary of the publication of *Historia de las Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas, followed a few years later by *The Devastation of the Indies. A Brief Account*, in which he talks about the horrific things done to the original inhabitants of the Americas by their Spanish colonizers in the name of the Christian faith, a habit of violence replicated a few decades later by English colonizers in the North American context. We therefore are living through a significant decade of remembrance, reflection, and unpacking of our faith legacy. What are we called to do as followers of Jesus now, in the years to come, and on into the future: dissent, debate, death, separation from the wider society, new forms of witness and walking in the world?

In this time of remembrance of the 500 years of the Reformation, I've given significant thought to the legacy in Latin America of the various reforming and transforming movements coming out of sixteenth-century Europe, in contrast to how that legacy is played out in the United States

\*Nancy Bedford is Georgia Harkness Professor of Applied Theology, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

(where I've lived for the past decade and a half). The tenor of the internally varied Protestant movement in Latin America has been quite consistently that of a non-Constantinian minority. Nowhere in Latin America does any confessional movement or church related directly or indirectly to the Reformation of the sixteenth century have official standing as the preferred religion, nor does any such movement exercise symbolic hegemony. That has been the role of the Roman Catholic Church, for good or for ill.<sup>1</sup> In practical terms, this means that in Latin America "Protestants" in the sense of the magisterial Reformation, "Anabaptists" in the sense of the Radical Reformation, as well as other so-called "free churches" share quite a similar ethos in a much more companionable way certainly than in sixteenth-century Europe, but also arguably than in twentieth-century English-speaking North America. In Latin America, we live out our Reformation heritage as religious minorities together. Most of us are quite distrustful of ecclesiastical hierarchies. Even in the case of those among us who call themselves bishops or apostles, the structures and influence that accompany those titles are in practice not very robust. The place from which we influence our societies as Protestants in Latin America is decidedly "from below," and the tools at our disposal are those of a minority religious community, one that is often despised, mistrusted, or misunderstood by the majority.

But what of the situation in the United States? Needless to say, it is quite different. Admittedly, there is a technical separation of church and state, but the symbolic force of the Protestant legacy has been formidable. Moreover, that legacy has been intimately tied to the history of the conquest of this territory and the establishment of a system that benefits so-called white people, people whose ancestors largely can be traced back to Europe—in short, people who look like me. The classic postcards of this fraught legacy are the images of picnics after church service on Sunday in the wake of a lynching.

As a theologian living and working in this country, I am very concerned about the Protestant-informed informal, practical, popular theologies that underlie the acceptance and justification of a white racist *system* in this country. I'm not speaking so much even of theologies that might justify personal white supremacist attitudes (we might think of certain fringe radio preachers wafting in on the car radio late at night on the AM dial). I'm speaking of a wider, generically Protestant legacy that too easily glosses over its complicities and its direct agency in producing a corrupt and oppressive system, focusing as it does on individualized and

---

1. The few quasi-exceptions to these generalizations, found in small countries such as Guatemala or in areas of larger countries such as Brazil, where Protestants have significant political clout and influence, are not encouraging.

spiritualized responses to God, managing somehow not to worry about the fact that 10 o'clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week in this country.

I'm not saying that there is a version of Protestantism that is somehow the official religion of this country. That would be putting it too simply. It seems to me that the idols Mammon (money) and Moloch (who violently demands human sacrifice), guarantors of white privilege, have been *de facto* perhaps the greatest religious forces in the country's history. What worries me is the extent to which the legacy of the Reformation has adapted itself to idolatrous ends, tending to lose sight of the uncompromising, demanding figure of Jesus of Nazareth and his call to us both to follow him (Mark 8:34) and to "count the cost" of doing so (Luke 14:25-33).

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the legacy of the Reformation in this country has been hijacked by toxic whiteness. By "toxic whiteness" I mean the working assumption, embedded in laws and customs so as to be almost invisible to those privileged by them, that so-called "white" people are superior to all others and have a right to possession of this land. It is often buttressed by religious or quasi-religious symbols (such as the white Jesus or the white Santa Claus) and accompanied by systematic historical amnesia about the annexation of Indian lands, the aftermath of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment of Japanese-American citizens, the consequences of redlining for black families, US overt and covert military interventions globally, and much more.

A strong symbol of the way the Protestant legacy is distorted by whiteness in this country is a meme that circulated on social media after the 2016 presidential election. It shows a white, bearded, long-haired Jesus, carrying several suitcases, striding straight at the viewer. Above his head are printed the words in a white-colored font, in capital letters: "On my way back to the White House."<sup>2</sup> Another meme shows the current occupant of the Oval Office sitting at his desk, with a white Jesus on the right of the picture and a white Santa Claus on the left, saying "Welcome back, gentlemen!" The clear implication of the images is that as long as a black man was in the White House, Jesus would be absent from it; only a *white* man in the *White* House could guarantee the presence of the *white* Jesus.

The voting statistics from the 2016 election tend to bear out this interpretation: 81 percent of white, born-again evangelicals voted for the winning candidate, as did 58 percent of mainline Protestants (who in turn

---

2. See <https://me.me/i/on-my-way-back-to-the-white-house-oh-jesus-7793037>.

are mostly white).<sup>3</sup> Not just working-class white folks, but white people across all educational and economic levels voted for a person who made explicit and implicit statements of his loyalty to white supremacy and white nationalism a hallmark of his campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, black and Latino/a voters within the Protestant spectrum did not in their majority support or vote for a white nationalist candidate. What concerns me is the glib way in which the overt white racism and sexism of the candidate was pushed aside as secondary by a majority of white, church-going inhabitants of the Protestant faith legacy (who in turn are the majority of those who in this country practice the Christian faith in the wide tradition of the Reformation). The blatancy of this particular individual provides us with a heuristic tool, because he embraces so unabashedly and plainly a set of values and convictions embodied in our society's power structures. Such values and convictions about whiteness, however, are in no way limited to any particular person or political party. They simply coalesced with particular vehemence and clarity around this candidate in the backlash to the presence of a black man and his family in the White House, a president who many Americans could not see as either genuinely Christian or truly a native-born US American.

The response of the white Protestant electorate (again, not just evangelical but also mainline Protestant, heterodox Protestant, and so on) in 2016 crystallized for me something that black and womanist Protestant theologians—from James Cone to Kelly Brown Douglas to Stephen Ray—have been saying for a long time, but which has been very hard for me to hear and understand, probably because of my own white privilege: that the white God of the white Protestant tradition in the United States is scarcely recognizable as the God of the Gospels, and is in fact largely another god altogether, whose function is to guarantee white dominance.

As I began to put it tentatively to myself: the *white* Jesus on his way back to the *White* House, with his suitcases full of policy prescriptions that hurt brown and black folks in particular, is not Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christian faith confesses as the incarnation of the Son of God, but rather an incarnation of the gods Mammon and Moloch, working in the idolatrous service of white supremacy and white nationalism. What we are facing is more than a toxic distortion of Christology, but a continuing development that has deep historical roots and is taking the faith of the

---

3. "How the faithful voted," *Pew Research Center*, Nov. 9, 2016, [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/ft\\_16-11-09\\_relig\\_exitpoll\\_religrace/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/ft_16-11-09_relig_exitpoll_religrace/).

4. See the exit poll reports here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html>.

Reformation as lived out by the many of its adherents in this country to the territory of apostasy and self-destruction.

Given this frightening panorama, one that makes it structurally difficult to live out one's faith in anti-racist, life-giving ways, my next question is: as we commemorate the 500 years of the Reformation, what elements in the Protestant tradition could help us in pushing back against the idolatry of toxic whiteness? Several come to mind immediately, among them the Reformed notion of *status confessionis* (that is, the imperative to speak truth to power when complicity with an unjust system threatens the integrity of our confession of Christ); the young Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, proclaiming that God's glory is seen in the humility of the cross of Christ, not in grasping power or supremacy; or in Paul Tillich's re-working of the "Protestant Principle" to communicate the Reformation insight that only God is Ultimate, and all other things (even good things such as the Bible or church or theology) are penultimate, and can lead us to idolatry if we try to put them in God's place.<sup>5</sup> All of these are significant tools in our Reformation toolbox that can help those of us coded as white to disarticulate our complicities with toxic whiteness.

More specifically, however, I feel led to what elements in the *Anabaptist* ecclesial and theological tradition, the one I love best and the one I inhabit, could serve to curb these distortions and help open up concrete ways for our continual conversion to the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Are there ways in which the Anabaptist legacy can help us communicate and live out the Gospel as good news for all people and thus as bad news for white nationalism and other forms of death-dealing idolatry rampant in our society? I do believe we can find some hints and guidelines in the Anabaptist legacy. These are elements that are neither exclusive to Anabaptists nor always present among us, but I do find them hope-inducing or hope-stimulating, as I try to be faithful by the Spirit to the way of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> They are ways that help point us in the direction of what the gospel of Matthew calls "the narrow door."

What I'd therefore like to do very briefly is to explore through an Anabaptist lens two theological themes common to all Christians: (1) the "wide narrowness" of the way of Jesus and (2) the continuing work of the Spirit in opening up spaces for justice and mercy.

There is a necessary caveat to all of this. I don't want to ignore or minimize the challenges that unexamined whiteness poses for the

---

5. Cf. my essay, "The Reformation and Theological Epistemology: A Latin American Perspective," *Journal of Latin American Theology. Christian Reflections from the Latino South* 13 (2018), 77-96.

6. Here I'm borrowing language from J. Kleinberg, "Restoring Hope Through Post-Trauma Groups," *Group* 31 (2007), 293-308.

Anabaptist legacy. Just as one example of that: as I searched in the academic literature for “black Mennonites” in the United States, what came up most insistently were not portrayals of the black Anabaptist experience, but references to the memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*.<sup>7</sup> I was happy to find, however, that the work of Regina Shands Stoltzfus, who teaches peace, justice, and conflict studies at Goshen College, also came up, as did the work of other Anabaptist scholars who take race and gender seriously.<sup>8</sup> But we have a long way to go. For that reason, we need to be particularly wary of traps and distortions that tend to lead us back around to toxic by-ways and into the dead-ends of toxic whiteness, thinking wrongly that our counterhegemonic ethos immunizes us to the habits of toxic whiteness or other ills.<sup>9</sup>

### THE “WIDE NARROWNESS” OF THE WAY OF JESUS

In a part of the Sermon on the Mount that we perhaps don’t read as often as some of the others, tucked between the golden rule and the saying about a tree and its fruit, Matthew portrays Jesus as saying the following:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Mt. 7:13).

The image would have been quite vivid for the Jesus’ listeners: walled cities had a wide, heavy gate that closed at nightfall. If someone arrived late or needed to enter in the case of an emergency, there was an alternative small opening beside the wide gate that was accessible only to

---

7. Rhoda Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress. A Memoir of Going Home* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009).

8. Cf. Shands Stoltzfus’s lecture “Black, Female and Mennonite: Navigating Cultural, Political and Religious Identity” at the 2010 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, reproduced in *Mennonite Life* 65 (August 2011) at: <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-65/>. The experiences of Rosemary Freney Harding and Vincent Harding are illustrative of the complexities of the black Anabaptist experience. See also, for example, Hubert Brown, *Black and Mennonite* (1976, rpt. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2001); Malinda E. Berry, “On racism, politics and liberation (words we don’t like to hear),” *Vision* (Fall 2002), 20-28; and the work of J. Denny Weaver.

9. As Timothy Epp makes clear in his essay “Anabaptist-Black Interaction in Upper Canada: An Initial Reconnaissance,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 31 (2013), 31-49, a historical survey of interactions between white Anabaptists and black people in the United States shows that “while Mennonites faced persecution, migration, and liberation, their empathy towards the suffering of others, including African-Americans, was checkered.” For example, the earliest known petition against slavery in the United States (drafted in 1688 in Germantown, Pa.) was signed by four men, three Mennonites or former Mennonites and one Quaker and thus illustrates unease among Anabaptists about slavery; other Mennonites did own black slaves—cf. Epp, “Anabaptist-Black Interaction,” 33.

one person at a time.<sup>10</sup> Jesus is saying that the time is advanced, indeed, that night is beginning to fall, but that there is a small entrance, a constricted and narrow gate (*πύλη*), through which we can still squeeze. It is not the wide way of hegemonic “common sense,” but a narrow way that can be quite uncomfortable and will put us at odds with the dominant logic about how best to live. It is a way that forces us to get rid of some of our baggage if we want to squeeze through.

Matthew’s text draws on a long tradition in the Hebrew Bible that contrasts alternative ways: blessing and curse (Deut. 11:26-28); the way of life and the way of death (Jer. 21:8). Here the wide gate, the apparently easy way, turns out to be the wrong choice. The choice we are urged to make is that of the constricted gate, the hard way. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount illustrates why this gate is so narrow: it entails difficult choices such as loving our enemies; refusing to judge others; rejecting the god Mammon and the accumulation of riches; giving generously of ourselves; and not being only hearers but also doers of the word. In a context of toxic whiteness, the narrow gate entails asking hard questions about how our society works and to whose benefit.

Early church interpreters very wisely often read the passage in Matthew 7:13-14 about the narrow gate in conjunction with John 10:9 and John 14:6, understanding that Christ, who himself is the Gate and the Way, helps us on our way through the narrow gate.<sup>11</sup> As our Brother, Friend, and Teacher, Jesus himself is squeezing through that narrow gate, taking us by the hand to help us pass through it as well. Yes, the gate is narrow, but we are not alone in passing through it. There is, in the end, a *wide narrowness* to this way of Jesus, for —paradoxically— we find that grace abounds as we squeeze through the narrow gate through which we are called to pass.

In contrast to this *wide narrowness* of Jesus, one of the main problems I see in many popular forms of Christianity in this country is what I’d like to call a *narrow wideness*, that is, a narrowness about things that the Gospel seems somewhat indifferent about (such as familial configurations and reproductive rights) paired with an indifference to teachings of the Gospel that do indeed seem quite pointed and narrow (such as putting aside loyalties to Mammon or not treating some groups as if they were ontologically inferior to others). Let me give one example from history that illustrates how some Anabaptists tried to embody the *wide narrowness* of Jesus as opposed to the prevailing *narrow wideness*.

---

10. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7. Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 312.

11. Cf. for instance Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 26.25*, quoted in Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 313; an English translation of the *Homilies* is available here: [https://archive.org/stream/fifty-spiritualho00-pseuuoft/fifty-spiritualho00-pseuuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/fifty-spiritualho00-pseuuoft/fifty-spiritualho00-pseuuoft_djvu.txt).

In 1527, Michael Sattler, along with other German-speaking Anabaptists in the Zürich area, wrote what came to be known as the *Schleitheim Confession or Agreement*, in seven articles.<sup>12</sup> Article 4 focused on the separation of believers from the dominant religious majority:

For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who [have come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other. . . . Wee should shun and flee from . . . all popish and anti-popish works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, commitments [made in] unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God, in accordance with all the injustice which is in the world. . . . Therefore, the unchristian, devilish weapons of force—such as sword, armor and the like—will unquestionably fall from us, and all their use [either] for friends or against one's enemies [...].<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, this was a drastic rendition of the “narrow gate.” Anabaptists who identified with this Confession avoided oaths, the use of weapons, and participation in public offices.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, as James Stayer points out, in practice, Swiss and South German Anabaptists could be quite creative in their interpretation of these commitments. For example, though Article 5 of *Schleitheim* stated that every congregation would have a formal leader or shepherd, Anabaptists in Esslingen, upon encountering strict penalties imposed on church leaders, “responded, after a bit of trial and error, by dissolving their leadership into the congregational rank and file.”<sup>15</sup> They were then able to tell the authorities that “their meetings had no particular leaders or preachers, that they assembled solely for the purpose of reading from the Bible.” If some from their number were arrested, they might recant and continue to worship in the official Protestant church. Meanwhile, the “recanters” might continue to meet privately with Anabaptists:

Instead of being shunned, in accord with Matthew 18, these “weak” members—who usually swore oaths when required, sometimes carried weapons during guard duty, and almost always attended the

---

12. An English translation by J. C. Wenger can be found here: [www.courses.washington.edu/hist112/schleitheim%20confession%20of%20faith.htm](http://www.courses.washington.edu/hist112/schleitheim%20confession%20of%20faith.htm).

13. *Ibid.*, with some slight modification of the word order for clarity.

14. I subscribe to the “polygenetic” account of Anabaptist origins, so I don’t try to fit all the various Anabaptist movements into one theological or historical mold. Not all Anabaptists rejected the use of the sword.

15. James Stayer, “Swiss South German Anabaptism,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism 1521-1700*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 101.



preaching in the state church—seem to have been accepted as a matter of course by fellow Anabaptists in Esslingen.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the Esslingen Anabaptists were trying to hold to their convictions about separation from the ethos of the dominant system without falling into legalism or rigidity. Perhaps what these Esslingen Anabaptists were able to perceive in practice is just how complex pushing back against systemic evil and injustice can be, especially for those of us who have not opted to live apart in a separate utopian community—something that brings with it its own complications—but are trying to be “in the world and not of the world,” or “in the dominant system yet not of the system.” A rigid legalism about exactly how to proceed through the narrow gate tends to be counterproductive and ultimately alien to the good news of the Gospel; what is helpful is a community that is vigilant in the face of injustice, supportive of creative ways to push back against systemic inequities, and able to welcome the provisional and imperfect nature of our efforts.

The Esslingen Anabaptists were trying to do “a new thing,” albeit imperfectly, and in that sense they seem to provide a pattern for us (especially those of us who are coded as white) as we try to disengage from our complicities with racist structures and the apostasy of following the false white Jesus. One of the marks of toxic whiteness is that it leads well-meaning white folks to freeze up for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. Inevitably, those of us coded as white *will* make many mistakes as we try to learn to push back against systemic racism. In that difficult learning process, we need persistence, creativity, and a constant reminder of what the “narrow wideness” of the way of Jesus is all about—none of which we can do without the illumination, accompaniment, and empowerment of the Spirit.

### THE CONTINUING WORK OF THE SPIRIT IN OPENING UP SPACES OF JUSTICE AND MERCY

Taking seriously the centrality of the continuing work of the Spirit is one of the marks of the “narrow wideness” of the way of Jesus. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17) is more than a proof text, a song lyric, or a slogan—it describes the dynamic by which the narrow gate opens up into a wide space. Such a dynamic is always linked to sensibility about the reality of the most vulnerable in society, or as Hans Denck put it, to aligning ourselves not with the high-ranking people of the

---

16. Stayer, “Swiss South German Anabaptism,” 101.

world but following the narrow path of Jesus alongside the humble.<sup>17</sup> The Spirit reminds us of what Jesus did, why he did it, and how he did it, while opening up wide spaces for us to do a new thing in continuity with Jesus. We *proceed* in the Spirit along the way of Jesus (*prosequimiento*: continuing, moving forward).

A look at Anabaptist history can again help us here, specifically the way pneumatology works together with Christology for the good of subaltern subjects, for example women. In describing the early trajectory of Anabaptists from the perspective of gender, Sigrun Haude points out that a consensus among a number of historians is that while “women rarely experienced anything akin to complete equality within Anabaptism,” it is also the case that they tended to have more scope for action and more important roles than in other Reformation groups.<sup>18</sup> As in the Reformation as a whole, she finds a clear correlation between greater freedom for women and stressing the Spirit over against literalistic and legalistic readings of the Bible. For example, there was a big difference between those who focused on Joel 2:28-29 (the Spirit of God will be poured out on both women and men) and Galatians 3:28 (in Christ there is no male and female), and those who prioritized passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34 (women should keep silent in church).<sup>19</sup>

Early Anabaptists were focused on the centrality of the authority of Scripture as were other Reformation movements, but they “took very seriously the notion of the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of interpreting the Bible,”<sup>20</sup> which opened up possibilities for interpretive agency even to those without formal academic training, to men of lower social status, for example, and to women generally. This pneumatic emphasis was also linked to strong eschatological convictions and to a respect for prophecy. As Hans Denck put it:

Whoever has received God’s new covenant, that is, the person in whose heart the Law has been written by the Holy Spirit, is truly just. However, anyone who thinks that he [or she] can keep the Law by conforming to the Book (Holy Scripture), ascribes to dead letters a capability which is possessed only by the living Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

---

17. Hans Denck, *Schriften* II, 50f., excerpted in “Appendix A: Sources,” Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1988), 143.

18. Sigrun Haude, “Gender Roles and Perspectives among Anabaptist and Spiritualist Groups,” in Roth and Stayer, *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, 429.

19. Cf. *Ibid.*, 423-435.

20. Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, and Gary K. Waite, “Introduction,” in: *Sisters: Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite and Doopsgezind Women, ca. 1525-1900*, ed. Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, and Gary Waite (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 2.

21. *Schriften* 2:59, excerpted in Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 143.

As the eschatological and prophetic urgency of the movement receded, so did women's options for official leadership, though women continued to find "ways to bypass the restrictions of male elders," most often in "non-traditional formats."<sup>22</sup>

What one sees here is the importance of a truly Trinitarian hermeneutic with material consequences, which prioritizes the way of Jesus as illuminated by the Spirit in a given time and place, and that understands the urgency of responding to the challenges of our context. Not only in Anabaptism, but in many other movements, the pattern seems to be that the more formal and institutionalized the ecclesial structure, the less space there is for women in leadership; when a movement becomes a fixed organization, possibilities for flexibility, creativity, and unconventional leadership decline.<sup>23</sup> As in the example of the Esslingen Anabaptists, so also here: rigidity is not helpful in pushing against hegemonic common sense about gender or race or unjust societal structures, but an openness to the creative work of the Spirit allows for imaginative possibilities for transformation and for new roles to emerge for subaltern subjects.

Jesus points to and indeed constitutes the "narrow gate," but the path through and beyond the constrictive gate of the parable, into the wide-open spaces of grace, justice, and transformation is a pneumatic one, in which the Spirit takes on an enlivening, central, and often surprising role. If we are to disarticulate the stranglehold of toxic whiteness and liberate the Reformation legacy from its complicities with the false Jesus of white nationalism, it will be by the agency of the Holy Spirit who is able and willing to help us do a new thing.

## CONCLUSION: WALKING TOGETHER IN TROUBLED TIMES

After the white-nationalist demonstrations and violence in Charlottesville of August 11-12, 2017, several communities of faith in the Abrahamic tradition—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—came together for a service of hope and lament in Evanston, Illinois, at Second Baptist Church, a historically black congregation. I was invited to be one of the speakers, as a member of Reba Place Church in Evanston, the Mennonite congregation to which I belong.<sup>24</sup> My testimony in that packed building, alongside many people who profess the Christian faith and many others who do not, was that as a follower of Jesus in troubled times I draw

---

22. van Veen, Visser, and Waite, "Introduction," 3.

23. Cf. *Ibid.*, 4.

24. The service was held Aug. 17, 2017; cf. Mary Helt Gavin, "At Interfaith Service of Lament and Hope, Many Decry Violence and Hatred, and Some Even President Trump," *Evanston Roundtable*, Aug. 23, 2017, at <http://evanstonroundtable.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubsectionID=4&ArticleID=14038>.

inspiration from the way he encouraged his disciples to out-wit and to out-fox the haters, turning their logic upside down. That I try to remember what he said about being mild as doves but also as wise as serpents. That I feel inspired by the admonition not to turn into the very kind of human beings we deplore by mirroring hatred. And that I take seriously his teaching about how religious folk, specifically his own followers who invoke his name and movement, can become both hateful and hurtful, so that it is crucially important for those of us in the faith tradition that invokes his name to continually be converted toward justice and peace and away from abuse, violence, and obliviousness to our complicities with privilege. I shared that I lament the way in which white versions of the Christian faith have become toxic in this country and elsewhere, and that I hope and pray for the transformation and conversion of those us who say we are Christian, yet would justify the incarceration, deportation, or even elimination of the brown body of Jesus if we came across it today. I shared with them that as a Latina who passes for white in this society, I lament my own complicities in systemic racism and my blindness in the face of injustice. I hope and pray for continual transformation by the Spirit and for conversion to creative, nonviolent ways of walking in justice and in fierce love: in particular my own and that of others who look like me.

Early Anabaptists rebelled against ways of being Christian and of being church that “threatened to undermine the credibility” of the way of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> It had become difficult, in their context, for peasants and others to see how the Gospel is good news. As the poetic rendering of a letter written by Felix Mantz, included in the *Ausbund* (a traditional collection of early Anabaptist hymns) puts it:

One finds many people now  
 In this wide world,  
 Who preach God’s word,  
 Yet are full of hatred and envy:  
 They are not full of God’s love;  
 Their guile and deception is known to everyone.<sup>26</sup>

The same is true for us in this country today: it has become increasingly difficult to communicate how the Gospel could possibly be good news when the Jesus that is celebrated by so many is the false Jesus of apostasy

---

25. Cf. Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 6. In his work he emphasizes the anti-clerical nature of their protest and the need to study them as a social movement. “Anabaptist theology grew out of contemporary, and therefore chronologically circumscribed experiences, and can only be explained historically” (5).

26. “Six Anabaptist Hymns’ (1526-1529) from the *Ausbund*,” in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality. Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel Liechty (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 42.

and white nationalism, rather than Jesus of Nazareth, who calls us to go through the narrow gate, to let go of our baggage, and to move into the wideness of God's mercy. As we celebrate the liberating aspects of the legacy of the Reformation, may we also be wary of its hijacking by Mammon and Moloch, by white supremacists and white nationalists, and not least by our own blind spots and complicities. May the Spirit guide us to discover creative and life-giving ways to live out our faith as co-laborers of God's justice, to question the established common sense about this country's history, and to slip through the narrow gate that is the paradoxical way of Jesus into the wideness of God's mercy.

