What's in a name?

Several years ago, while we were engaged in ecumenical conversations with representatives of the Lutheran World Federation, a German historian turned to me, somewhat exasperated, and said, "Why do Mennonites in North America today still use the term Anabaptist?" For most contemporary German speakers, the word "Anabaptist" (*Wiedertäufer*) has negative connotations, thanks largely to its association in the public mind with the political anarchism of the Peasant's War or the apocalyptic fanaticism of the so-called "Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster." Both were violent events that seemed to confirm the worst fears of Luther and the other reformers that anyone who rejected infant baptism must be intent on destroying social and political order.

But my Lutheran colleague, who had come to respect Mennonite faith and practice, was also bewildered for another reason. "Anabaptism," he noted correctly, means to "rebaptize." Yet the radical reformers of the 16th century denied they were "re"-baptizing since they did not regard the ritual of their infancy as a true baptism. In their eyes, they were baptizing for the first time. For them, the term "Anabaptist," invented by their enemies, was offensive and misleading.

So why would modern Mennonites now willingly identify themselves with a word that was both associated with violence and communicated a false understanding of their actual beliefs? It was a fair question, especially since Anabaptism has become such a widely used term in the English-speaking world.

It's a question that Mennonite World Conference will likely need to face in the coming years.

Recently, leaders of the Brethren in Christ, a denomination that has been a strong partner in MWC for several decades, formally requested that MWC consider changing its name. For many in their tradition, a global church defined as "Mennonite" seems overly narrow and exclusive. Indeed, last summer, when the MWC assembly was held in Harrisburg, Pa., a Brethren in Christ stronghold, the news media reported on the event almost exclusively in terms of the "Mennonite" presence. So the question has emerged: Wouldn't the term "Anabaptist" be more inclusive?

I'm ready to support such a change. But if that were to happen, our Lutheran friends—and others as well—deserve a clarification of what Anabaptist actually means.

In my experience, Anabaptist is used today in at least three different ways.

First, the word continues to serve non-German speakers as a useful description for a distinctive movement of radical reform in the 16th century that gave rise to groups such as the Swiss Brethren, Dutch Mennonites, Moravian Hutterites and, over time, a host of other groups. Although the movement was far from unified—including people we would be hesitant to welcome into our churches today—Anabaptists generally shared a commitment to believer's baptism, a view of the church as separated from the world, and an earnest desire to follow the teachings of Jesus in daily life. For most people today, the term does not have the negative connotations it has in German. Alternatives like "Baptist" (*Täufer*) or "baptism-minded" (*Taufgesinnte*, *Doopsgezinde*) are either too easily confused with contemporary Baptists or just sound awkward. Thus, Anabaptist has emerged in English as a useful historical label.

Second, Anabaptism has also served contemporary Mennonites and other Christians as an ideal or standard in the ongoing quest for church renewal. The classic expression of this was Harold S. Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* of 1943. But since then many other historians and theologians have also appealed, albeit often in very general ways, to "the Anabaptists" as an authoritative lens for a particular understanding of Scripture or Christian faithfulness. Usually, the appeal is accompanied by a critique of the modern church and a desire to recover a more authentic faith. The current popularity of "neo-Anabaptism" or "naked Anabaptism" is one expression of this impulse.

Finally, Anabaptist has come to serve at least one more significant function, especially in the context of the global church. Today our global family includes, by one count, 227 different groups, each claiming some family resemblance to the Anabaptist reformers of the 16th century. For the global church, Anabaptism is a useful umbrella term that includes a broad spectrum of groups while avoiding specific denominational identity markers that are exclusive or parochial.

Has the time come for MWC to adopt a new name—perhaps Anabaptist World Conference? Or even, as some have suggested, Anabaptist World Communion? What are the gains? What are the losses?

In the coming year, MWC will begin a process of testing this idea. What is your perspective? What's in a name? TM

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