Baptismal genealogy

Dissolving the boundaries of bloodline, expanding our families

Caleb Kowalko

My journey *to* the Mennonite church has not been a unique one: a former Evangelical discovering a cruciform theology with profound social implications and a humble, lay-led worshipping community. My experience *within* the Mennonite church has also not been a unique one: feeling loved and appreciated but all the while navigating a questionable identity as a genealogical outsider.

It hit me hardest after I accepted the call to be a pastor of a Mennonite congregation. Within a few months of my first year as a pastor, I had been taken aside by a beloved and active couple in the congregation (both now deceased) to be firmly told, "You may be an Anabaptist, but you are *not* a Mennonite." They made their point clearly and firmly that "Anabaptist" was a looser theological identity, while "Mennonite" was a genealogical identity—a "bloodline"—available only by birth, and perhaps marriage. That was a prickly conversation, to say the least, as I had come to believe that, although my heritage is a mix of European backgrounds partially obscured by my mother's adoption, I was a Mennonite—enough so that I accepted the call to be a pastor of a Mennonite congregation. Over the ensuing years, I came to discover that I was far from the first to be told such a thing, not only in my congregation, but across the denomination and the global Mennonite community. And I learned how the conversation about ethnic Mennonite identity is a belaboured, decades-long (at least) debate that often causes many eyes to roll: "We're really talking about this again?!"

Ascribing the best possible intentions to that couple, I realized they were not insinuating that I was not accepted as their pastor, or even as a member of the congregation. They were actually very supportive of me. But even if I could be their pastor or a member of their congregation, I simply could not be a "Mennonite" to them. In a Mennonite congregation, I could serve and worship with Mennonites but not actually identify as one myself. For if I or others were to claim to be Mennonite, it would betray the very container of that identity—a genealogy, family, kinship, and lineage rooted in historical European "Mennonite" descendants. Certainly it is an identity and belonging that enables Mennonites to feel—or imagine—a deep connection to one

another through their genealogy. The "Mennonite game" is the obvious exercise in this, in which when people first meet they try to find mutual genealogical connections.

I became fascinated by how this genealogical identity has been centred within such a beautiful faith tradition. In the spirit of inclusion, it seems as though many—especially urban—Mennonites take the "both-and" approach: "Mennonite" is a lineage *and* "Mennonite" is a faith tradition. I deeply appreciate this effort while also sensing the boundaries that may still remain and the possibility of measuring genuine Mennonite belonging at the intersection of the Venn diagram of lineage and denomination. But my fascination with this situation has led me in other directions: to modern Western understandings of family, to scripture, to theology, to baptism, and to our colonial history.

There is more than one way that genealogical work might affect any of us. In *Healing Haunted Histories,*[1] Elaine Enns and Ched Myers demonstrate and invite all readers to this work as *a way of better understanding the historical currents we are born into*. They demonstrate what it means to have, in the words of Rowan Williams, a "serious sense of history, a willingness to understand how we got to be what we are and to see that how things are is not natural or eternal but results from decisions made—and not made—and quite a lot of things that are not controllable yet require from us a conscious and intelligent response."[2] The response to this genealogical work is the key for Enns and Myers. Hearing the stories and understanding our "bloodlines" mapped across land and time might prompt us to live and act differently. Especially as it relates to generational trauma and colonial histories, they believe this genealogical work can awaken an awareness of these "haunted histories" so that we might be healed through repentance, "response-ability," and radical solidarity.

But there is another way that digging into our genealogies might affect any of us. York University professor Dr. Frances J. Latchford describes this effect with an anecdote that introduces her monograph *Steeped in Blood: Adoption, Identity, and the Meaning of Family*:

> *Not so long ago, my mother presented me with an old manuscript, which she claimed was a copy of a journal and letters written by my great-great-great-great-grandfather Timothy Rogers (1756–1827). Inside the journal was a genealogy dating back to the thirteenth century that apparently links me not only to John Rogers the martyr (1505) but also to Edward I, king of England (1272). With the genealogy in hand, I was, of*

1 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021).

2 Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 10.

> *course, utterly seduced by these apparent bio-facts. They impressed me with myself. My immediate response to my mother's revelation was a deeply felt sense that this bio-genealogical knowledge—preserved magically, simply, materially, incontestably in the mere fact of a biological tie—reflected on me and said something unique about myself. In the course of this momentary seduction, I felt a rightful claim to identify with martyrs and kings. Feeling the powerful and immediate pull to identify with this bio-genealogy, however, does not erase for me the question of whether or not this kind of knowledge really does or should be understood to genuinely reflect who I am. This idea is operative in me at the same time that I am strongly suspicious of it. . . . This royal revelation story illustrates how bio-genealogical knowledge shapes our experiences of self and identity. It also elicits important questions about how bio-genealogical knowledge produces differentiated "family" subjects in the modern Western context. It has implications for how the possibilities of "family" experience are limited and determined in a social- political-historical context that insists on giving distinct meanings to the absence and presence of biological ties, or a knowledge of the latter, between "family" members.*[3]

Genealogical work, in other words, can have a profound effect upon our sense of *self, identity, and belonging*. It does so by inviting us to imagine genuine connection—and separation—through lineage, bloodline, or, as Latchford calls it, our bio-genealogy. This is certainly not an experience unique to Mennonites, then. This effect is something that I believe, along with Latchford, is taken for granted and widely accepted. Even if this was not the main goal of the methodology described in *Healing Haunted Histories*, it may be taken for granted by Enns and Myers as well. Our identities and sense of belonging can be largely impacted through the discovery of a bio-geneological tie. This is indeed what draws many people to this kind of bio-genealogical work in the first place. Latchford believes we catch a glimpse of this in the slogans of DNA testing services like "AncestryDNA's 'Discover the family story your DNA can tell' and 23andMe's 'Get to know you'."[4] She argues that while such knowledge has this impact on the identity and belonging of individuals, it is an impact that is not inherent to the bio-genealogical tie itself, but is rather an impact that we ascribe *to* the bio-geneological tie. What makes a family bond *genuine*, to Latchford, is not the presence of shared heredity or "blood," but the "onto-epistemic choice" to love and belong to one another even across difference.[5] This points to the possibility of reimagining real familial bonds.

3 Frances J. Latchford, *Steeped in Blood: Adoption, Identity, and the Meaning of Family* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 3–4.

4 Latchford, *Steeped in Blood*, 301.

5 Latchford, *Steeped in Blood*, 310.

Many Indigenous Peoples in Canada were—and are—those who understood and took seriously the possibilities of this choice and had the familial flexibility and openness to accept those who were different with the possibility of creating a new family by forging treaties. Treaties were never *just* legal documents. They often created the conditions for a new family or kinship network: a sense of identity and belonging. Harold Johnson, a member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation, narrated this new family being formed in Enns's own Treaty 6 territory:

> Kiciwamanawak, *my cousin: that is what my Elders said to call you. When your family came here and asked to live with us on this territory, we agreed. We adopted you in a ceremony that your family and mine call treaty. In Cree law, the treaties were adoptions of one nation by another. At Treaty No. 6 the Cree adopted the Queen and her children. We became relatives.*[6]

This new family relationship was not understood as a metaphor by many Indigenous Peoples in Canada.[7] It was a *genuine* family bond that spanned family lineage (and species!) and was made possible by the Creator mediated through the land itself, rather than bio-genealogy. It was intended to join different peoples to become one wider family with the firm sense that they truly belonged to one another and to the land. This understanding of treaty can demonstrate how, when faced with different peoples, family and kinship may indeed be identified as a boundary, but it is a boundary that is capable of being *expanded* and reoriented through a sacred decision—a choice. Reckoning and repenting of our haunted histories perhaps includes the ways we have neglected or distorted this opportunity for expanded family.

But to those of us in the Christian faith, perhaps the invitation to this opportunity is one that reaches much further back, to that moment when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist. There is wide acceptance across orthodox Christian traditions that baptism and the decision to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth unsettles our social matrix on all levels, reorienting our relationships and alliances around the body of Jesus. This impact of baptism touches kinship and the family as well. It's hard to ignore Jesus's words in Mark 3:32–35 (also Matthew 12:46–50, Luke 8:19–21):

> *A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* (NRSVue)

6 Harold Johnson, *Two Families: Treaties and Government* (Purich Publishing Ltd., 2007), 13.

7 Keavy Martin, "Kinship is not a metaphor," *Settler Colonial Studies* 13, no. 2: 219–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2022.2077901.

Reflecting on this passage in his commentary *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers explains how, in Mark, Jesus “introduces a new kinship model, based upon obedience, not to the family or clan patriarch, but to God alone (3:35). . . . He has repudiated the ‘old fabric’ (2:21), in order to make way for the new order. The fundamental unit of ‘resocialization’ into the kingdom will be the new family, the community of discipleship.”[8]

Jesus’s words about family may sound like loss, or like a command to abandon the *people* we deeply love and to whom we feel a deep bond (especially if one reads harsher words by Jesus about the family, such as in Luke 14:26). While following Jesus may require a severance (Matthew 10:34–35), the theological aim of baptism and discipleship is not the elimination of loving, nurturing bonds to create isolated individuals severed from any sense of belonging. Baptism does not need to destroy the ways families can potentially witness to God’s love, and so should not be conceived as loss or destruction. Rather, the waters of baptism are aimed at dissolving the *boundaries* of family, which opens up and liberates the possibilities of our identity and belonging from the private confines of family systems. That is, baptism is the fundamental *expansion* of our family and all its love and allegiances. By faith, our baptism might unlock our capacity to, in the words of Latchford, “decentre the biological family, rethink the possibilities of our bonds, and multiply our abilities *to be* family.”[9]

Perhaps whatever bond we imagine through our genealogies, or even just our “sameness,” is now to be imagined through our baptism.

A professor of mine, Dr. Willie Jennings, often shared a story with his students about the baptism of his friend’s son, which he attended. He recalled sitting in the back of the sanctuary, watching as his friend, his friend’s son, and the minister all stepped into the water of the baptistry together. After the young man had given his testimony from the pool, the minister allowed the father to step forward and share some words. He took that opportunity to speak to his son, reflecting on his and his wife’s joy when he was born and how proud they were to watch him grow and spiritually mature. But then he spoke some particular words to his son that Dr. Jennings wanted us all to hear. He told him, “but now, I no longer call you ‘my son’ but ‘my brother in Christ.’” The father then stepped back, the minister stepped forward, and the young man was baptized by water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

8 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Orbis Books, 2008), 168.

9 Latchford, *Steeped in Blood*, 26.

Baptism can point us toward expanded life together. It creates the possibilities of relating to one another as *real*—not just metaphorical—siblings in Christ across imagined boundaries of family, nation, race, ethnicity, and language. An expanded family emerges from that choice to step into the way of Jesus of Nazareth.

I would be remiss if I were not to acknowledge how this life-giving, boundary-crossing possibility undergirding baptism was distorted during the encounter between European colonialists and Indigenous Peoples around the world, including in the history of this nation now called Canada. In so many instances, baptism became a weapon of cultural genocide against Indigenous Peoples. Rather than expanding loving familial belonging, conversion and baptism were used to irreversibly sever loving bonds in Indigenous families and kinship systems and coercively repudiate their language, culture, and spirituality. This colonialist baptism reoriented Indigenous Peoples around the white European body rather than the body of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew from first-century Palestine, as kindred gentiles grafted onto the covenant of God's saving work. These are among the hauntings—the wounds—that need healing in our spaces and histories, as Enns and Meyers have so tactfully expressed in *Healing Haunted Histories*.

Still, I sense our responsibility to that history as settler Christians is not to abandon this meaning of baptism but to lean into it all the more as a way of widening our sense of identity and belonging to one another in Christ as a *real* family. Dr. Jennings reflects on this further in his essay "Being Baptized: Race":

> *A family gathered around a baptismal font or a congregation staring at a baptismal pool often see themselves reflected in those waters, either remembering their own baptism, or contemplating the joy of their community gathered for that event. Neither thought is wrong, but neither yet sees what the waters hold. This child or adult enters through the waters of baptism the body of Jesus filled with different bodies, spanning space and time. The newly baptized are set on a journey that will bind them to peoples they have not seen, to ways of life they have not known, and endow them with a holy desire to love other people different from the people who brought them to those waters.*[10]

Perhaps we can perceive the decolonial and intercultural possibilities in such a baptism. Perhaps this is how the Spirit is always pushing us. Perhaps whatever bond we imagine through our genealogies, or even just our "sameness," is now to be imagined through our baptism. Perhaps baptism allows us to turn around and look at our family genealogies as the "old wineskin"—still

10 Willie Jennings, "Being Baptized: Race," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Second Edition, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 286.

recorded, still accessible, still important to understand historically, but wrapped up in old, limited forms of identity and belonging.

What if the questions of the "Mennonite game" were not "Which 'Friesens' or 'Wiebes' do you belong to?" or "Who were your grandparents?" but rather "When did you join the family through baptism?"

And perhaps this means that the Mennonite church and its congregations have a tremendous opportunity before them. Not to simply open up the door to allow others to be genealogically "Mennonite," but to re-centre the new family, re-organized around the first-century Jewish Palestinian body of Jesus rather than around the white bodies of European descendants. Since bio-genealogical belonging has been centred in many Canadian Mennonite contexts, there is an opportunity not to simply throw away this emphasis on familial connection but to redefine it and lean into this expansion that Jesus has made possible.

Centuries ago, Mennonite Anabaptists paved a way by dying for the conviction that baptism into the Christian faith was not a birthright passed on through citizenship or lineage. Today, "genealogical" Mennonites can pave the way for all of us to better understand that my "bloodline" may name those from whom I came, but it does not define or contain all of those to whom I *truly* belong through baptism.

What if the questions of the "Mennonite game" were not "Which 'Friesens' or 'Wiebes' do you belong to?" or "Who were your grandparents?" but rather "When did you join the family through baptism?" or "Can you tell me about your baptism story?" This is not to rekindle old forms of division over baptismal convictions (pouring versus dunking, or even infant versus adult). Rather, it is to alter the way we imagine our bonds and connections to one another, away from the bio-genealogical, in order to say within and across faith traditions, "By the grace of Christ, you and I are truly siblings. My family is your family. My people are your people."

About the author

Caleb Kowalko received his MDiv from Duke Divinity School in 2016 and has been truly blessed to serve as the pastor of Calgary First Mennonite Church for the last seven and a half years. Caleb stepped away from ministry at the beginning of 2026, but he looks forward to engaging with all things church and theology as long as he has breath in his lungs.