

Living in an Amish Paradise?

by Greg Albrecht



before words like “Brainwashing” and “Cult” would be common reactions.

But when the group being considered is identified as the Amish, commentary invariably softens. Most casual observers think of the Amish lifestyle as pleasant, innocuous and even as a quaint throwback to another era. The average North American responds to the Amish lifestyle with curiosity, even admiration—rather than revulsion. The initial reaction of many is to appreciate the presumed innocence and simplicity of the Amish, whose people are called *gentle* and *plain*. The Amish are known as *gentle* and peace loving, for their pacifistic teachings, and *plain* and simple for their unadorned clothing and culture.

The Amish are popularly known as a people who are lost in time, a people who have been arrested in a former time and culture, relatively unaffected by the world that whirls around them. It’s a lifestyle that rejects modern innovations and technology—the cars, cell phones and computers that so characterize modern life in 21st century North America. This extreme retro way of life can seem attractive, especially during times when it appears we are enslaved to technology, with its devices and gadgets once touted as “conveniences” and “labor-saving” devices.

The Amish are committed to hard work, family and community. They use horse drawn buggies, favor clothing styles that come closer to 18th century apparel than contemporary culture, and they speak in a German dialect sprinkled with English words. In some ways the Amish life represents a

Imagine a rigid and repressive commune existing within the advantages and freedoms of modern, progressive and democratic North America. Imagine overbearing rules and regulations that people living in such an authoritarian subculture seem to willingly accept. Imagine a religion that imposes draconian restrictions on private life.

If the examination of such a culture continued in any detail, it would not be long

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life lived in the past, eyes firmly fixed on the historical/cultural rear view mirror, while distrusting and resisting virtually all change.

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The romantic myth of the Amish has been perpetuated in the media, in the movie *Witness*, and in the television show *Amish in the City*. But there is a dark side to all of the idealism that tourists in Amish country see as they shop for crafts and attend quilting bees.

and attend quilting bees. Romanticizing and idealizing Amish beliefs and practices overlooks many of the unbiblical, not to mention dysfunctional practices of this faith community. The spiritually sinister beliefs that undergird Amish life suggest we reconsider momentary flights of fancy that might lead us to conclude that embracing Amish values would enable us to return to our very own *Little House on the Prairie*.

Deep in the Heart of Amish Country

Joe Keim, who leads Mission to Amish People (MAP), asked me to visit his church and ministry. After reading my book, *Bad News Religion*, he wanted me to explain to his church more about the virus of legalism that thrives in religious environments. Joe is ex-Amish, or “saved Amish”—in 1985 he left the Amish lifestyle in order to embrace Jesus Christ. Joe wanted me to share insights about legalistic religion and to learn more about the often bewildering world that faces those who reject the highly regulated, legalistic Amish lifestyle

in favor of accepting true freedom in Christ.

During my visit to Amish country in Ohio, I found that even though my surname calls attention to my German heritage, I am considered an Englishman in Amish country—the word “English” is often used to describe anyone who has not shared the unique Amish religion and culture.

New Life is the home church of Joe Keim’s MAP, a ministry dedicated to helping those who have left the Amish ways and have embraced the fullness of Jesus Christ.

Simon, one of those who has been helped by MAP, says that he and his wife started to search the Scriptures one day when they heard someone was leaving the “Amish lifestyle.”

Simon was like many in other forms of religious bondage within Christendom, as an average Amish person he had trusted the bishop and preachers to interpret the Bible for him. But when he actually started to read and study the Bible for himself he became confused, as it dawned on him that the Amish did not believe in being saved as the Bible teaches.

The Amish officially read the Bible very seldom, and when they do, the German Bible (Martin Luther’s translation) is read in public, with little or no comprehension of what is being read.

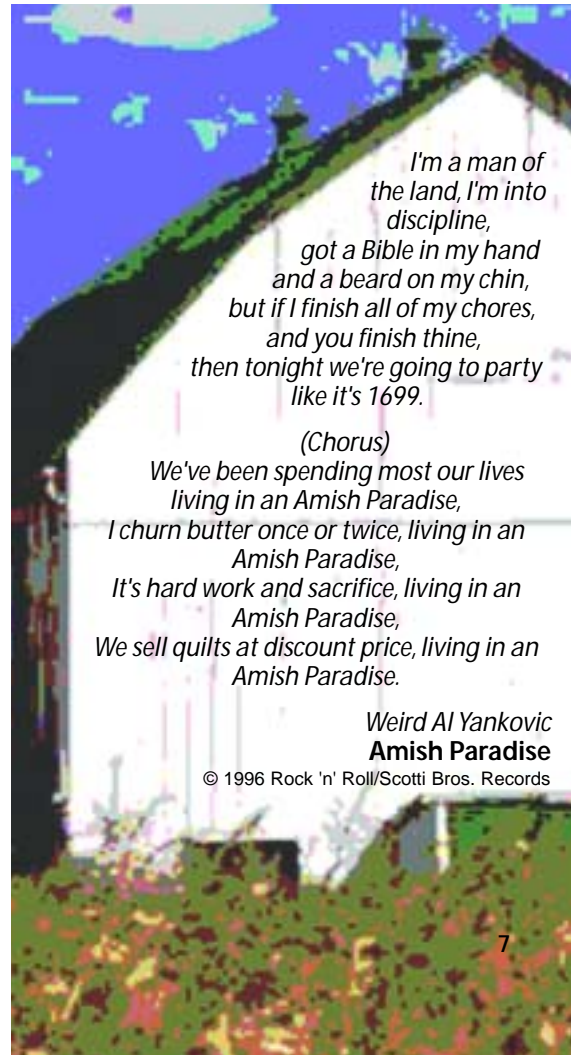
“God began to show us things in his holy Word that I had never seen before. It was like taking off the blinders. Wow!”

Ryan (his old Amish name was Eli) only recently found the ministry of MAP. He was born to “very Old Order Amish in Ohio with no indoor plumbing, electricity or modern conveniences. We were not even allowed to see a doctor or a dentist except in cases of extreme emergency. My mother, Mary, died giving birth to my sister, who also died. This became a constant question



I would have later in life—‘Would they have lived if we were allowed to have a doctor present?’”

After Ryan’s father was killed, Ryan was sent to live with an even more legalistic Amish family in Pennsylvania whom he was told were relatives—he later discovered that this “aunt and uncle” were not related to him at all. In this community “everything was done the old way, we did not even use propane. We were not permitted to use a telephone or ride in an automobile, even if it was ‘English’ owned. We absolutely did not discuss anything with any non-Amish, even to the point of having to treat other



I'm a man of the land, I'm into discipline, got a Bible in my hand and a beard on my chin, but if I finish all of my chores, and you finish thine, then tonight we're going to party like it's 1699.

(Chorus)

We've been spending most our lives living in an Amish Paradise, I churn butter once or twice, living in an Amish Paradise, It's hard work and sacrifice, living in an Amish Paradise, We sell quilts at discount price, living in an Amish Paradise.

*Weird Al Yankovic
Amish Paradise*

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Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was the Reformer of German-speaking Switzerland, and his hometown of Zurich eventually came to be seen as the cradle of Anabaptism.

Amish from different parishes with suspicion.

There was a lot of physical and mental abuse in the household, and every Sunday I had to review all of my transgressions. One question that always brought an argument was about my parents and my sister, what they had done wrong that God allowed them to die—and why couldn't we see a doctor? These questions were always met with physical punishment, but never any real answers. I was told that these, and all of my questions, were questioning God's will, and that I must have evil in my heart to even think of asking them."

Eventually Ryan, after enduring beatings, was kicked out of his home and shunned, as he turned his back on the legalistic practices of the Amish.

All those whose stories I heard who are part of the ministry of MAP endured a time of pain and loss as they realized the spiritual bankruptcy of religious legalism.

Like the Old Testament nation of Israel at the time of their exodus from Egypt, they had little idea of the Promised Land to which they would eventually journey. They knew the pain they were leaving behind—the lifestyle and regulated society. But, just as Israel did, they all experienced a sense of loss.

Remember, not everything in Egypt seemed oppressive to the Israelites. The slavery of Egypt, regulated as it was by religion, offered security. Under religious slavery and bondage in Egypt the Israelites at least knew where the next meal would come from. The slavery of Egypt also offered an identity. Rescue from religious legalism and all of its bondage often involves a loss—loss of a religious identity, loss of a distinctive and special culture, in many cases a loss of family and friends, and often a loss of history and tradition that was rooted in religious bondage. There is also the loss

of a special and unique status, the belief that your group and your group alone contains all "true" believers.

While in Ohio, I joined a brother-in-Christ, now ex-Amish, as he visited a friend still confined and defined as Amish. Because he uses electricity, my friend has been spurned by his family.

My ex-Amish now born again Christian friend had taken me to the only Amish home where he was still welcome. I will never forget that afternoon. My friend's parents live only a few miles away from him—yet they will not talk with him. He had to ask one of his few remaining Amish friends about his own parents' well-being—parents whom

he never sees, but who live only a few miles away!

Where Did They Come From?

The Amish date their history to Switzerland, in 1525. One primary belief, later called *believer's baptism*, today embraced by many Protestant churches at large, subjected this small group that came to be known as *Anabaptists* to severe persecution. Anabaptist is derived from the Greek word *anabaptizein*, which means "to rebaptize."

In the immediate wake of the Reformation, Anabaptists rejected the practice of infant baptism. Thus, if one followed the logical consequences of Anabaptist teaching, to be a Christian one had to be rebaptized as an adult, for Christians at that time had been baptized only as infants. The mere suggestion of such a thing was a slap in the face to both the established Catholic church, as well as the emerging Protestant church.

Anabaptist was the name given to the movement by their 16th century opponents. Anabaptists were seen as neither Catholic nor Protestant. While the Anabaptist movement had a varied cast of characters, most agree that Anabaptism was part of the Radical Reformation (also known as the Left Wing of the Reformation).

Up until the time of the Protestant Reformation, beginning in the early 16th century, there were only two recognized Christian churches—the church of the west, today



Anabaptists ruthlessly persecuted in 17th-century Vienna, Austria.

known as the Roman Catholic church, and the church of the east, today primarily known as Greek, Russian and Armenian Orthodox.

The Protestant Reformation was a revolt of some Christians in the west against authoritarian abuses and unbiblical teachings and practices of the Roman church. Martin Luther (1483-1546) is credited as the first Reformer, a German Catholic monk who was convicted that God's grace, not human works, is the basis of salvation. The Reformation began in October, 1517, when Luther protested the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences (the granting of forgiveness of sin in return for a monetary payment).

Many followed the lead of Luther, contextualizing the significance of God's grace as it applied within their own countries and cultures. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was the Reformer of German-speaking Switzerland, and his hometown of Zurich eventually came to be seen as the cradle of Anabaptism.

The original Anabaptists were born in Zwingli's Zurich, believing that while one becomes a citizen of a state by virtue of birth, physical birth does not confer Christianity. They believed that a personal commitment is necessary to become part of the body of Christ. This conviction led to the rejection of infant baptism, commonly believed at that time to accord Christianity as a result of birth into a Christian family.

Three Core Beliefs

Three distinctives separated the Anabaptists from others who departed from the Roman Catholic or newly formulated Protestant interpretation of Christianity: 1) *Believer's Baptism*, 2) *Pacifism* and 3) *Community of Goods*.

1) *Believer's Baptism*: The Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, teaching instead that a person must understand the gospel before

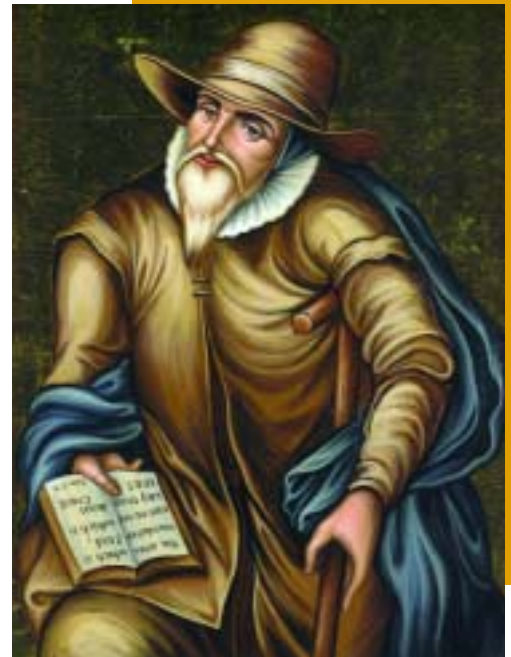
baptism. Anabaptists have also been known as the "believers' church"—a reference to their insistence in believers' baptism. Today the Amish baptize by pouring water from a cup. The person being baptized kneels, and as the words "Father, Son and Holy Ghost" are spoken, small amounts of water are poured on their head.

2) *Pacifism*: The Anabaptists believed that Christians should not protect property or obtain a right by the use of force. Anabaptists have come to be known as the "peace churches"—given their historic commitment to pacifism. For Anabaptists, pacifism also embraces the value of non-conformity, with literal moral implications of all of Jesus' teachings taught as the epitome of righteousness. Behavior and practice that flow from Anabaptist pacifism necessitates social and cultural boundaries, with inevitable and unending discussions and definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

3) *Community of Goods*: The Anabaptists held that Christians could not possess private property, but rather all goods and assets must be shared, "in common" (see Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 4:32-5:11). This teaching takes the non-conformist value that undergirds pacifism, with its *cultural boundaries*, adding an additional distinction—*geographical separation* from the "world," in the form of communal living.

These three central teachings distinguished Anabaptists and, in their view, determined whether a person was a "true" Christian. Each of these teachings, respectively, progressively more difficult, were believed to be part of the narrow way to the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:13-14).

Believer's Baptism eventually came to be accepted by many in the



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Protestant world. However, the second belief, *pacifism*, is a further separation of the sheep from the goats, according to the Anabaptist perspective. Anabaptists believe that "true" Christians practice pacifism, which of course involves non-participation in the military. Finally, the third belief, *Community of Goods*, is far more difficult to practice than the first two, and today it is observed only by one major Anabaptist group, the Hutterite Brethren Church (who date their inception to 1528). This belief involves living apart from the "world"—separated from all but the "only true" believers who are willing to practice the supremely narrow way of giving all worldly possessions to the church.

The Mennonites—and Their Seven Articles of Faith

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ship for German and Dutch Anabaptists, and eventually provided the name by which this larger group is known today—Mennonites. The early Mennonite movement formulated seven articles of faith:

1) Baptism is only for mature believers, who actually request baptism and who manifest (that is, prepare for and meet necessary qualifications for) a new way of life. Infants may be “dedicated” but not baptized.

2) Before the “breaking of bread” (the Lord’s Supper) all brothers and sisters who have strayed from obedience to Christ’s teaching (as strictly interpreted by their church) should be warned and, if necessary, publicly admonished before the congregation. Those who do not repent must be banned.

3) The Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated only by baptized mature believers.

4) There are two classes of people: **a)** those who belong to the devil and live in sin and **b)** those who have been delivered from sin by Christ. Those who have been delivered should make every effort to remain without sin.

5) Pastors will be chosen by the congregation, and will meet the New Testament qualifications as taught by the Apostle Paul (“the rule of Paul”).

6) True believers practice non-resistance. Weapons of violence have no place among Christians. Neither can Christians serve as magistrates—but rather, following Christ, they must refuse to rule, even as Jesus refused the offer to be made king.

7) Christians must not swear any kind of oath. Christians must testify to the truth, but they shall not swear.

The Amish

The Protestant Reformation was a political as well as a spiritual reformation, but Anabaptism rejected any of its political implications, accepting only the spiritual. After the Reformation, the religious division of Europe included Roman Catholics controlling Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Austria. Protestant countries comprised Lutheranism that predominated in Germany and Scandinavia, Reformed in Switzerland and Holland, Presbyterians in Scotland and Anglicans in England.

But Anabaptists, soon to be known as Mennonites, resisted geographical boundaries as defined by the state. The Mennonites believed in a strict separation of church and state and had no desire to exercise political power.

While the Anabaptists believed in non-resistance, the Protestant movement was a united effort on the part of both ecclesiastical and political leaders to correct the

abuses of the Roman church. They agreed to support their goals, if necessary, by force of arms.

In 1693 Jakob Ammann (1644-1720), a Swiss elder, founded the most conservative wing of the Mennonites, the Amish. He and his followers reacted against what they perceived to be a lack of discipline among the Mennonites. Ammann’s reforms were intended to restore some of the early and more rigorous practices of the Mennonites and to recover and reinstate what he viewed as traditional Anabaptist teaching.

The impact of Ammann’s reforms were ludicrous, if not tragic, for he, as a part of his reformation, banned and excommunicated nearly half of all Mennonites. However, after much soul searching, Ammann decided to rejoin the mainstream Mennonite church. In order to demonstrate repentance, Jacob Ammann excommunicated himself, but the Mennonites would not accept him, and Ammann died while banned and excommunicated.

The first Amish people came to America in 1727, initially settling in Pennsylvania, and later moving to other states, primarily Ohio, New York, Illinois, Indiana and Missouri. Official membership records are not available, but most estimates place the Amish population within the United States today at about 150,000, living in 230 communities in 24 states. About half of all Amish are concentrated



PHOTO COURTESY OF MISSION TO AMISH PEOPLE MINISTRY

in Pennsylvania and Ohio and the remaining 75,000 are spread across 22 states, as well as western Ontario in Canada.

Amish Faith and Practice

Anabaptism officially believes, as stated in the Dordrecht Confession of 1632, that salvation is through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. However, for Anabaptists in general, and the Amish in particular, what one does and how one behaves is directly related to one's salvation. External practices are viewed as categorical evidence of salvation, with the church and its extra-biblical rules (*Ordnung*) effectively serving as the gateway to the kingdom of heaven. While the Amish officially believe in salvation through Christ, they believe that one can lose salvation, and the determination of whether one has lost salvation is rigidly determined by church authorities.

The church rigorously governs the life of the Amish, with the bishop being the highest clergyman in the hierarchy of each church, congregations that meet in individual homes. The Amish believe, correctly, that a church is people more than it is a building dedicated for religious purposes.

This extreme retro way of life can seem attractive, especially during times when it appears we are enslaved to technology, with its devices and gadgets once touted as “conveniences” and “labor-saving” devices.

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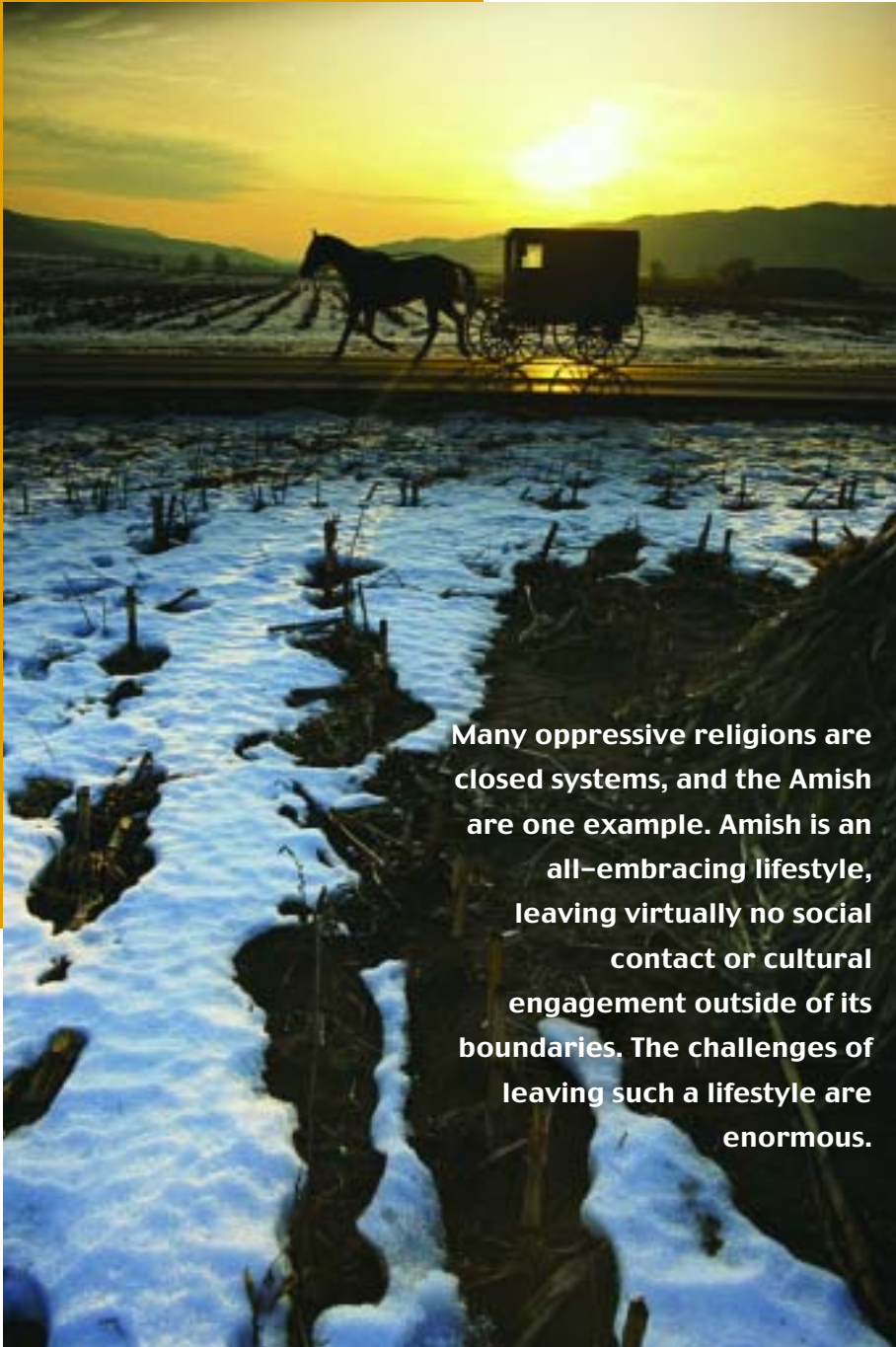


Among other duties, bishops actively police each church. The bishop oversees two ministers and a deacon. Candidates for ministers and deacons are proposed by congregations. Elections follow an Amish interpretation of the biblical account of casting of lots. Ministerial candidates choose from identical hymnals, one of which includes a biblical quotation inserted into it. The ministerial candidate who chooses the hymnal that bears the citation from the Bible becomes the new congregational leader.

Each church district is governed by unwritten (and extrabiblical) rules (*Ordnung*) recorded in *The Ordinance Letter*, dos and don'ts that stipulate the Amish way of life. *The Ordinance Letter* includes issues of dress and grooming, equipment, entertainment, transportation and employment. When a church member violates the rules, the bishop determines punishment. Amish lifestyle today falls somewhere along a spectrum of Old Order Amish (most restrictive) to New Order Amish (most progressive).



PHOTO COURTESY OF MISSION TO AMISH PEOPLE MINISTRY



Many oppressive religions are closed systems, and the Amish are one example. Amish is an all-embracing lifestyle, leaving virtually no social contact or cultural engagement outside of its boundaries. The challenges of leaving such a lifestyle are enormous.

New Order Amish, for example, allow brighter colored clothing. Old Order groups live a plain lifestyle and separate themselves from the world by refusing to accept modern innovations, such as radio, television and automobiles. Old Order groups believe in foot washing, as well as a strict adherence to *Meidung* (the practice of shunning, avoiding excommunicated persons). Driving a car, using a tractor and drinking alcohol are

among Old Order sins that receive a maximum six week ban from church attendance, and the somewhat public condemnation of shunning.

Thus, for all of the presumed attraction of their gentle and plain culture, the Amish are merely yet another example of oppressive religion. While many are impressed by their outward piety, careful scrutiny of what the Amish lifestyle includes reveals a repressive

and restrictive life with ominous and dark consequences.

This “gentle and plain” way of life may initially appear attractive but on closer scrutiny it is just another religion permutation that closely resembles Jesus’ condemnation of oppressive religion—“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

Old Order Amish do not allow their children to receive an education beyond the eighth grade, a practice that was approved by the United States Supreme Court in 1972. This practice alone hinders and confines the future for most Amish children to life within the Amish community—for they lack any necessary academic credentials to exist among “the English.”

While some argue that Amish standards are commendable in that they require rejection of the conspicuous consumption that illustrates much of what is wrong with the North American love affair with materialism, any group or religion that insists that its way is the only way bankrupts the potential contribution of its youth to the larger society. Far beyond any physical considerations, representing such a narrow and restrictive way of life as the only lifestyle that God is pleased with severely distorts and misrepresents the gospel.

The Amish Jesus

One of the often overlooked but essential differences in the Anabaptist faith is their view of Jesus. A Christ-centered faith looks to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus as central events, having significance and meaning, being of “first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3). The birth of Jesus, his atoning death on the cross and his victorious resurrection from the grave are evidenced in the preaching, beliefs, practices, celebrations and music



of Christianity—the centrality of who and what Jesus is forms Christian culture and faith.

The Anabaptists accept Jesus as Savior, but they also attach primary importance to his role as teacher and example. They believe that exact and literal obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ is a requirement—they feel obligated to live as they believe Jesus lived (their prohibition of swearing legal testimony and their insistence on pacifism come from overly literal interpretations of Matthew 5:34, 39). This rigid ethical literalism (also found in other parts of Christendom) leads Anabaptists to be, in some way, a separate people, separate even from other Christians.

The Anabaptists (and the Amish, one of the more conservative of Anabaptist iterations today) believe that the path to the kingdom of God is narrow and hard. Lack of acceptance by society at large, rejection and even persecution are welcome evidence that they are on the right path.

The Amish take affiliation with their church seriously, for the practical application of that relationship is believed to impart both spiritual identity and salvation. While it is common for the Amish to not only speak of neighbors

who are not Amish (primarily German speaking) as “the English” another practice is to identify outsiders as a “Lutheran mechanic” or a “Catholic policeman.”

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all-embracing lifestyle, leaving virtually no social contact or cultural engagement outside of its boundaries. The challenges of leaving such a lifestyle are enormous.

It is for that reason that ministries like MAP exist, and for that reason PTM supports the ministry and work of MAP. It is vital that the grace of our Lord and Savior be

All those whose stories I heard who are part of the ministry of MAP endured a time of pain and loss as they realized the spiritual bankruptcy of religious legalism.

preached, it is critically important that freedom in Christ is made known, for religious legalism is a plague, a virus that threatens all of us.

Is Leaving Worth It?

Why not remain within the secure confines of a highly regulated environment? And why leave at all? After all, what’s wrong with laws and rules that keep humans from sinning? Isn’t it better to be safe, perhaps even err toward being a little more conservative than one needs to be, rather than taking a chance and being too progressive and “crossing the line”?

These questions do not apply only to the Amish, but to many who find themselves in a religious environment that teaches salvation to be dependent upon church orders, church rituals and rites, church decisions and church mandates. When faced with the reality that religion is dictating one’s life, rather than Christ, it can be easy to justify remaining in Egypt by assuming that worship of Jesus is still possible while remaining within a repressive heritage and tradition. After all, many reason from within the legalistic mindset, God is pleased with those who do their best to be good.

It is here that the gospel intersects religion. This is where the rubber hits the road. It is here that Jesus demands a choice. The nexus of human tradition and human religion with the gospel of Jesus Christ means that only one road may be taken—not both. Salvation



The spiritually sinister beliefs that undergird Amish life suggest we reconsider momentary flights of fancy that might lead us to conclude that embracing Amish values would enable us to return to our very own *Little House on the Prairie*.

Readers who want to know more about the Amish lifestyle, and about the ministry of MAP, are invited to listen to an interview with Joe Keim, available at www.ptm.org/AMISH during May and June.

is either faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone—or it is religious works, deeds, regulations and rules.

Salvation can never be Jesus plus what we are able to perform. Salvation is either Jesus alone or it is not salvation. We do not contribute to our salvation—we do not help Jesus in gaining or maintaining our salvation. And that is exactly where the intoxicating brew of legalism overcomes so many, as they do their best to please God—without either knowing, grasping or believing the gospel truth that no human deed, apart from Jesus, can save us.

Of course, the decision to remain locked within a philosophical and religious lifestyle or to take the often enormous and painful steps to leave can be an extremely arduous decision. Seeking to justify the comforts of slavery within a religious Egypt, some argue that restrictive religion is actually beneficial—in that it plays a similar role in society as a penitentiary.

The nexus of human tradition and human religion with the gospel of Jesus Christ means that only one road may be taken—not both. Salvation is either faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone—or it is religious works, deeds, regulations and rules.

According to this view, just as there are people who need rules and restrictions, physical boundaries and even physical shackles, there are those who need the enforcement of spiritual regulations, those who need religious rites and rituals, for without them people would be permissive and perhaps immoral. This view argues that the performance of religious rituals gives life a moral rhythm, and “keeps people out of trouble.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the other side of this perspective. Paul argues, without equivocation, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). On God’s part, the gospel of Jesus Christ does involve risk. This risk is the one that Jesus willingly took to his cross. After all, Jesus did not go to his cross with signed commitments from those for whom he would die. Jesus had no guarantee that we humans would not cheapen his sacrifice by attempting to take advantage of God’s grace.

Yet that is a risk that God has taken in order to free us from bondage. God does not force us to leave the bondage of our lives. He stands at the door of our spiritual prisons and knocks. He offers us freedom, and that freedom is life lived to the full, new life in Christ unknown to those locked within the dungeons of legalism. □