Reading, Interpreting, and Applying Christian Scripture in Amish Communities

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Abstract: An unmistakable feature of contemporary evangelical Protestant interpretation has been the search for biblical principles that lie behind the text. Some outside observers of the Amish give the impression that the Amish also search for biblical principles that can be abstracted from the text and reapplied in varying contexts. Through a careful examination of the way that Amish actually read, interpret, and apply Scripture in concrete, local situations, a different interpretive approach is revealed. Despite varying shifts in Protestant hermeneutics, the Amish have largely maintained a precritical churchly reading of Scripture that takes their parents' and grandparents' handling of Scripture as the starting point and strongly emphasizes the moral sense of the biblical text.

INTRODUCTION

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Protestant hermeneutics has been marked by valiant efforts to get behind (or within) the scriptural text to uncover an abstractable cross-cultural meaning that can be reapplied in various contexts.[1] In the field of Amish studies, the few references to Amish scriptural interpretation tend to assume a shared Protestant hermeneutic whereby "biblical principles" are extracted from the scriptural text and applied in real-life situations.[2] The result is that

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[1] For an excellent set of essays on this subject, see Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, and Murray Rae, eds., *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003). Cf. Anthony Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 29.

[2] Bernard Ramm goes so far as to state that "the Bible is more a book of principles than a catalogue of specific directions." Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 186. A few pages later, he asserts that "commands in terms of one culture must be translated into our culture" (189). This requires the apostle Paul's statements to be reinterpreted "for our culture," with the result that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (about not cutting the hair and wearing a veil) "in modern terms . . . means that Christian women should avoid all appearances of immodesty, and should be chaste and dignified in dress and behavior" (189–90). This is a concrete difference in practice between the Amish and the vast majority of Protestant groups and has not been explained in mainstream literature about the Amish. Cf. Christopher G. Petrovich, "First Corinthians 11:2–16, Calvin, and Reformed Praxis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 77 (2015): 131–33.

Amish theology has often been reduced to values or lessons that the Amish can teach us.[3] This article, by contrast, will provide a thick description of where and how often the Amish encounter Scripture. Far from mirroring a Protestant hermeneutic that abstracts biblical principles to be reapplied in different cultural contexts, the Amish appropriate the meaning of Scripture in their concrete local contexts with tradition as the starting point.

The task of understanding the biblical interpretation of the Amish from the outside is particularly difficult. The Amish have no centralized bureaucracy or source of authority to consult on doctrinal matters; they use old German dialects in church services and generally shy away from answering visitors' questions about their religious beliefs. An ethnographic approach is obligatory because the handling of the biblical text is not the exclusive task of an ecclesiastical elite whose labors can be documented vis-à-vis authoritative publications.[4] Amish ministers are drawn from the congregation by lot and without any formal training, and thus lay experience is believed to be sufficiently formative to produce insightful ministers of the Word.[5]

The observations and conclusions of this paper are drawn from the author's ten years as a participant observer in two Amish communities, visits to more than eighty Amish communities in fourteen states and one Canadian province, attendance at religious services in forty-seven church districts in twelve states representing all six Amish affiliations,[6]

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[3] Donald B. Kraybill, *What the Amish Teach Us: Plain Living in a Busy World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); and Joseph F. Donnermeyer, *Lessons for Living: A Practical Approach to Daily Life from the Amish Community* (Walnut Creek, OH: Carlisle Press, 1999). Cf. Michael Billig and Elam Zook, "The Functionalist Problem in Kraybill's Riddle of Amish Culture," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 5 (2017): 82–95.

[4] The question of whether qualitative researchers should be members of the population they are studying has been usefully addressed by Sonya Corbin and Jennifer L. Buckle, with the tentative conclusion that, if navigated with sufficient humility and self-awareness, being both an outsider (because of upbringing) and an insider (by joining the population being researched) can be the most fruitful avenue for qualitative research. Corbin and Buckle, "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8 (2009): 54–63.

[5] Merold Westphal and James Smith consider three levels at which the Bible is read: as individuals, as families, and as congregations. This approach applies well to the lay Amish experience. Westphal and Smith, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 143.

[6] In their introduction to the Amish, Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt propose that there are forty Amish affiliations. Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Although this idea has been rebutted by Christopher G. Petrovich, it remains the case that the Amish are more diverse than ever before and that the trend is unlikely to reverse anytime soon. Petrovich,

continuing private correspondence with ordained ministers from highly traditional Amish congregations, and relevant primary and secondary documents.[7]

My relationship with the Amish began when I withdrew from graduate studies at Wheaton College at the end of the summer term in 2004 and settled in the Swiss Amish community of Allen County (IN), where I became a member of the Dan Schmucker (New Order Amish) district. Their rapid shift toward the Charity churches and my displeasure at the rowdy behavior of the Old Order youth prompted me to relocate to the Old Order Amish community in Pearisburg (VA), during which time I was asked to draft a statement of faith for the new daily devotional *Tägliches Manna*. The statement was approved by the Old Order Amish bishop committee without revision.

My position as a participant observer may well raise questions of objectivity and reflexivity. Proper participant observation has been described by ethnographers as the achievement of cooperation and correspondence with the people who are being studied.[8] In this regard, my ten years as a columnist for the Amish-owned and -published *Plain Communities Business Exchange* (which continues to the present), business and personal contacts with a wide range of Amish persons (including private correspondence with a prominent Old Order Amish bishop from New York), and continuity in faith and practice regarding dress style, technological limitations, rural lifestyle, and instruction in the "Eighteen Articles of Faith" (The Dordrecht Confession) suggest a reasonable degree of integration in terms of cooperation and correspondence.[9]

A central lesson learned in my years of participation, cooperation, and correspondence is that when outsiders draw conclusions based on simple observations, they necessarily incorporate significant assumptions when they describe why the Amish believe or act as they do. This essay, by

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"More Than Forty Amish Affiliations? Charting the Fault Lines," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 5 (2017): 120–42.

[7] The most comprehensive compilation of primary source documents is John M. Byler, ed., *Alte Schreibens: Amish Documents and Record Series* (Sugarcreek, OH: Schlabach Printers, 2008).

[8] As described in Gabriella D'Agostino, "Participant Observation: The Personal Commitment in Native Life—A Problematic Methodological Topos," in *Ethnography: A Theoretically Oriented Practice*, ed. Vincenzo Matera and Angela Biscaldi (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 313–40.

[9] I have continued to write for the *Plain Communities Business Exchange*. From July 2020 until the spring of 2022, I wrote a column titled "Letters from Abroad." Since 2016 to the present, I have been writing a monthly business column for the same journal. This column remains a major point of contact between me and the Amish.

contrast, will examine Amish biblical reading and practice from the inside, as it actually takes place in Amish communities. Along with other conclusions, it will become clear that the Amish do not mirror a Protestant hermeneutic that abstracts biblical principles to be reapplied in different cultural contexts.

SOURCES

Secondary sources are few that explain the way(s) that Amish persons read, interpret, and apply Scripture. Brad A. Igou's *The Amish in Their Own Words* is a popular entry point into the Amish.[10] However, none of the chapters address the subject of biblical interpretation. Topical studies that touch on the theology and spirituality of the Amish include *Keeping Salvation Ethical*, *Amish Grace*, and essays on spiritual theology and the possibility of writing an Amish theology.[11] But even these texts only occasionally touch on the topic of biblical interpretation.

In the rare instances that scholars have paid attention to the subject of Amish interpretation of Scripture, the underlying assumption seems to be that the Amish mirror twentieth-century evangelical Protestant hermeneutical methods.[12] Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher epitomize this historiographical assumption when they state that "the Amish do not claim that every—or even most—church regulations can be supported by a specific verse from scripture. They do

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[10] Brad A. Igou, *The Amish in Their Own Words* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1999).

[11] J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1997); Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Christopher G. Petrovich, "Spiritual Theology in an Amish Key: Theology, Scripture, and Praxis," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6 (2013): 229–54; John S. Oyer, "Is There an Amish Theology?," in *Les Amish: Origine Et Particularismes, 1693–1993*, ed. Lydie Hege and Christoph Wiebe (de Sainte-Marieaux- Mines, France: l'Association Francaise d'Histoire Anabaptiste-Mennonite, 1993), 278–99; and Christopher G. Petrovich, "Writing an Amish Theology," *Journal of Religion* (forthcoming).

[12] Cf. William Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988); David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization, Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989); and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 273. Grant R. Osborne suggests that the move from the "original text" to "contemporary application" proceeds as follows: textual meaning > original cultural situation > deep principles > parallel situations today > application/contextualization. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 134. Amish-Mennonites, especially of the more mainstream Beachy and conservative Mennonite type, have been markedly influenced by this type of interpretive logic.

maintain, however, that each guideline is based on a biblical principle."[13] At the very least, this claim requires that the Amish move beyond the scriptural text to a "biblical principle." A similar characterization appears in *The Amish*: "The Ordnung provides guidance on those issues that Scripture does not clearly or directly address. Containing prescriptions (what one should do) and proscriptions (what one should not do), this oral guidebook applies biblical principles—especially separation from the world—to everyday issues ranging from education to transportation, from dress to technology."[14]

Here again, "applying biblical principles" is a loaded phrase that the authors do not qualify or properly flesh out. Left as such, the phrase fails to note that the Amish have maintained a form of precritical scriptural interpretation in spite of the many shifts and detours that Protestants have taken since the time of post-Reformation High Orthodoxy. The differences in method are significant.[15]

Regarding primary sources, Amish authors are rare, the chief exception being Benuel S. Blank, who (in a private capacity) authored *The Amazing Story of the Ausbund*, *From Creation to Resurrection*, *Resurrection to Reformation and Beyond*, and *The Scriptures Have the Answers*. One can include, as well, the writing of nineteenth-century Lancaster County (PA) Old Order Amish bishop David Beiler titled *Wahre Christentum* (True Christianity) and the occasional writings collected in book form of Holmes County (OH) bishop David Troyer.[16] The only book-length attempt to summarize Amish faith is *1001 Questions and Answers on the Christian Life*.

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[13] Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish Way: Patient Faith in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 56.

[14] Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 118. Here a footnote accompanies the text, noting that "in applying biblical principles to issues of daily life, the Ordnung operates much like Midrash in the Jewish tradition" (118n435).

[15] Steven Reschly, "Paradigmatic Paradigm Problems: Theory Issues in Amish Studies," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 5 (2017): 66–81. Additional conceptual problems with popular-level writing on the Amish have been identified—for example, the "Negotiating with Modernity" paradigm of Donald B. Kraybill. Cory Anderson, Joseph Donnermeyer, Jeffrey Longhofer, and Steven D. Reschly, "A Critical Appraisal of Amish Studies' *De Facto* Paradigm, 'Negotiating with Modernity,'" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58 (2019): 725–42.

[16] Benuel S. Blank, *The Amazing Story of the Ausbund* (Sugarcreek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2001); Benuel S. Blank, *From Creation to Resurrection* (Sugarcreek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2005); Benuel S. Blank, *Resurrection to Reformation and Beyond* (Sugarcreek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2010); Benuel S. Blank, *The Scriptures Have the Answers* (Sugarcreek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2009); David Beiler, *Das Wahre Christenthum*, trans. Benuel S. Blank (Sugarcreek, OH, Carlisle Printing, 2009); and Anthony Troyer, ed. *The Writings of David A. Troyer* (Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 1998). I do not cite the writings of Blank in what follows because he is more interested in setting the commonsense biblical narrative within the frame of world history than in interpreting the text itself.

However, this text is actually a modest reworking of a book by Mennonite Daniel Kauffman: *1000 Question and Answers on Points of Christian Doctrine*.[17] The nearest the Amish have come to publishing a contemporary statement of faith is the ten-point belief statement published on the inside cover of *Tägliches Manna*, a devotional booklet distributed by a New Order Amish publisher in Pennsylvania under the oversight of a panel of Old Order Amish bishops. The fifth article describes their belief in "the inspiration and sufficiency of the Holy Bible"[18] based on citations from Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16; and Hebrews 4:12. Although this statement of faith has its limitations because the bishop panel does not include representatives of the more traditional Amish (who constitute approximately one-third of the total population), based on visits to more than fifty traditionalist Old Order communities, I would conclude that this statement well summarizes the traditionalist Old Order Amish doctrine of Scripture as well. If any term deserves to be added, it would be the word *authority*.[19] Questions of the accuracy and reliability of Scripture are generally not entertained by the Amish.

For the Amish themselves, the primary sources of religious instruction include private Scripture reading, biweekly sermons, family devotions, and the Eighteen Articles of Dordrecht—the statement of faith that Amish ministers use to catechize the youth in preparation for baptism. Dordrecht, however, contains no article that outlines a unique doctrine of Scripture. Secondary edification comes through old German and Pietist literature that is more frequently read by traditional Amish,[20] and religious themes that are present in periodicals. The most prominent devotional publication is *Tägliches Manna*. Since its content is composed exclusively by members of horse-and-buggy congregations, the overwhelming majority of which are Amish, and no ministerial office is required for publication, *Tägliches Manna* provides a direct window into Amish interpretation of Scripture as it is performed across a wide cross-section of the Amish population.

In short, the Amish read the Bible privately, during family devotions, and occasionally in concert with devotional literature. Scripture is read in

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[17] *1001 Questions and Answers on the Christian Life* (Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 1992); and Daniel Kauffman, *1000 Questions and Answers on Points of Christian Doctrine* (Mifflin, PA: Green Pastures Press, 1992).

[18] Noah Hershberger, ed., *Tägliches Manna* (Stoneboro, PA: Pilgrim Book Printing, November–December 2021), i.

[19] Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher note that "biblical authority is assumed and not explained." *The Amish Way*, 227.

[20] For a summary of Mennonite and Amish devotional literature from 1600 to 1942, see Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949), 154–227.

biweekly church services by the deacon, quoted in sermons, and occasionally alluded to in otherwise general-interest publications—most of which are written by plain Anabaptists for in-house consumption.[21]

READING (AND HEARING) THE WORD OF GOD

The Amish recognize the Old and New Testaments of Protestantism as the authoritative Word of God. The Froschauer Bible was the most commonly used text by Swiss Anabaptists in Europe and was freely used alongside Martin Luther's translation by Amish on both sides of the "stream baptism" controversy in the middle of the nineteenth century.[22] Today the Amish most frequently (and for some groups, exclusively) read the Bible in Martin Luther's translation. When an English translation is used, the King James Version is the overwhelming favorite. Since Martin Luther's translation of the Old and New Testaments includes the apocrypha and the Amish agree with Luther's description of it as "useful and good to read," they often cite the case of Tobias and Sarah (from the book of Tobit) in wedding sermons. The practice of citing Tobit has a long and venerable history. A European minister's manual dated 1781 instructs the preacher to turn "to the book of Tobit. Although it is an apocryphal book and is not counted among the books of Holy Scripture, it nevertheless gives a beautiful teaching, strengthens the pious and God-fearing ones in the faith, especially in regard to marriage, and leads through all trial and tribulation to the hope that God finally will bring things to a conclusion with joy. So one begins in the book of Tobit."[23]

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[21] These publications include weekly news shared in *The Budget*, *The Diary*, and *The Connection*; the business monthly *Plain Communities Business Exchange*; homemaker quarterlies *Little Red Hen* and *Keepers at Home*; and the religiously and practically engaged *Vanguard*, *Family Life*, and *Plain Interests*. Although editors are careful not to offend the sensibilities of Amish readers, some of these publications exhibit an ecumenically minded, pan-Anabaptist character that is somewhat at odds with the particularism of Amish theology and practice. The spillover effect is greatest in larger, older settlements and is beginning to have noticeable effects on scriptural interpretation since Mennonites and New Conference German Baptists are more open to consuming Protestant religious materials, including Bible commentaries, than the Old Order Amish and frequently adopt Protestant evangelical hermeneutical methodologies without realizing it. A parallel development is weekly Bible studies that are becoming increasingly common across the central and northern parts of Lancaster and Chester Counties.

[22] Paton Yoder, *Tradition and Transition* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 68–69.

[23] John D. Hostetler, *Ein alter Brief Copia oder Abschrift eines Briefs, welcher von Dienern und Aeltesten der Gemeinde zu Holland auf ihr Begehren und Ansuchen ist zugeschicht worden den 26ten März, von Hanss Nafziger in Esingen bei Landau in Oberland* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonitische Verlagshandlung, 1916), 23. Three extant copies of the German document are printed in Byler, *Alte Schreibens*, 84–99.

Although the Amish rarely cite biblical texts to make explicit arguments, Scripture weaves its way through the tapestry of their lives in many fundamental ways, more implicit than explicit, but always as an authoritative, inspiring, and trustworthy guide for life, the citation of the Tobit story being a concrete instance.

Family devotions vary considerably between households, with one family reading a prayer from a prayerbook in the mornings and evenings and reading the Bible on the Sunday morning between biweekly church services. Another family may read a chapter of the Bible together every day, read from a devotional booklet, and possibly attend a Sunday school service on the "in-between Sunday." The task of biblical interpretation is typically reserved for the head of the household. And in the three most traditional Amish affiliations—known as Andy Weaver, Kenton, and Swartzentruber Amish—the head of the household often defers to the ministers of the congregation. Private Bible reading is less frequent among groups that tend to be more deferential to church leadership and also tend to be more resistant to changes in dress, technology, and social order.

Although these congregations appear more hierarchical, it is a hierarchy of age and experience, not a hierarchy of intellect or training. This is because Amish ministers in all instances are ordained by lot, are drawn from members of the congregation, and do not have formal theological training of any type. As a result, differing degrees of Bible reading say more about a family's (or an affiliation's) theology of church order. The Amish measure Christian faithfulness in terms of obedience to God's revealed Word (as moral command) rather than by the frequency with which the Bible is read.[24]

Devotional literature takes its place alongside the Bible in Amish homes. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the primary source of devotional literature among the Amish had been German works from old Anabaptist and Pietist sources. Most popular among the Amish were prayerbooks such as *Christenpflict* and *Lust Gärtlein* and meditations of practical and spiritual edification such as *Regeln eines Gottseligen Lebens* (Rules of a Godly Life), *Das Wahre Christenthum* (True Christianity), and *Die Wandelnde Seele* (The Wandering Soul). Also widely read was Johann Friedrich Stark's Lutheran Pietist *Tägliches Handbuch*[25] and thoughts on

[24] Oyer, "Is There an Amish Theology?," 281.

[25] *Christenpflict* (Aylmer, ON: Christenpflicht, 1994); *Neu vermehrtes geistliches Lust-Gärtlein frommer Seelen: Das ist: Heilsame Anweisungen und Regeln zu einem gottseligen Leben. Wie auch schöne Gebete und Gesänge, Täglich und auf alle Festtage im Jahr, in allerley Anliegen zu gebrauchen* (Lancaster County, PA: Verlag von den Amischen Gemeinden, 2010); Beiler, *Das Wahre Christenthum*; Johann Philipp Schabalie, *Die Wandelnde Seele* (Baltic, OH: Raber's Book

Christian faith and life by nineteenth-century Old Order Amish bishops David Beiler and David A. Troyer. Since the mid-twentieth century, the primary extra-biblical sources of religious instruction have been Mary Miller's *Our Heritage, Hope and Faith*[26] and *In Meiner Jugend: A Devotional Reader in German and English*.[27]

The contemporary daily devotional booklet has also entered Amish homes, especially among the New Order and mainstream Old Order Amish. Until 2011, the most frequently read publication had been *Beside the Still Waters*, edited by conservative Amish-Mennonites in Kentucky (with contributors coming from various types of plain Anabaptist churches), as well as the occasional Protestant devotional booklet that an Amish person came across and considered beneficial enough for personal use. Since 2011, the Amish who accept the daily devotional have mostly switched to *Tägliches Manna* because it is a cooperative venture between Amish and horse-and-buggy Mennonites guided by an exclusively Old Order Amish bishop committee.

Published six times a year, *Tägliches Manna* features a daily devotional text of 250 to 350 words with a short title, a single verse printed between the title and the devotional text, a scriptural reading for the day printed in the top left-hand corner of the page, and an inspirational quotation or relevant Bible verse at the bottom of the page. The explicit goal of the publication is to "help instill godly convictions, to support stability and traditional values in our plain Anabaptist churches, to inspire Christians to humbly live a life of courage, integrity, and upright character, and to guide lost souls into the fold of God." Articles for publication are accepted from male members of Amish and Old Order Mennonite (horse-and-buggy) churches who are in good standing with their congregations. For the sake of accountability, the name of the author is printed at the bottom of the page.[28] If a submitted article passes an introductory examination by the editor, the submission is then reviewed by two bishops for doctrinal soundness. With a circulation of thirty-five thousand copies, and the

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Store, 2001); and Johann Friedrich Starck, *John Frederick Starck's Daily Hand-book in Good and Evil Days: Containing All the Meditations and Prayers of the Complete German Original Edition, Together with an Appropriate Selection of Standard English Hymns* (Fredericksburg, OH: Toby Hostetler, 2000).

[26] Mary Miller, *Our Heritage, Hope and Faith*, rev. ed. (Walnut Creek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2008).

[27] Joseph Stoll, trans., *In Meiner Jugend: A Devotional Reader in German and English* (Aylmer, OH: Pathway Publishers, 2000).

[28] The more traditional Amish object to the use of the English language, identifying the author (which could become a source of pride to the writer), and soteriological statements that reflect a purely penal substitutionary account of the atonement.

overwhelming majority of subscribers being Amish, *Tägliches Manna*'s wide acceptance speaks for its theological and interpretive orthodoxy and allows a glimpse into actual biblical usage in contemporary Amish literature.[29]

The Amish read the Bible at home, more often as family units than as private individuals, nearly always with local rather than global interests in mind. A significant percentage of Amish read the Bible alongside devotional literature, from old German (Anabaptist and Pietist) to contemporary plain Anabaptist sources (especially *Tägliches Manna*), and the occasional Protestant evangelical source. But the most formative biblical influence is the biweekly church service and visits to neighboring church districts on the in-between Sunday.

Church services in the traditionalist Swartzentruber, Kenton, and Andy Weaver Amish congregations follow the same basic pattern as in other Amish congregations. The meeting is opened with two (or more) songs. The second song is always the *Lob Lied* (Praise Song), during which time the ministers go upstairs (or to an adjacent building) to counsel. After the singing, the opening sermon lasts roughly thirty minutes and is seen as preparatory for the main sermon of the day. The opening sermon is followed by kneeling prayer and then Scripture reading, which is the responsibility of the deacon or, if there is no deacon, a minister or older male member of the congregation. The main sermon follows the Scripture reading. This sermon lasts roughly seventy-five minutes and thus is seen as the main source of spiritual nourishment for the day (and week). One song follows the main sermon, after which there is a closing prayer and then the benediction. The church service typically lasts three hours.

A unique characteristic of Amish sermons is that the minister is expected to quote Scripture from memory. The twice-yearly communion services and preparatory services last much longer, from three to five hours, during which the minister recounts the biblical narrative from creation to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from memory, without notes of any type and no biblical text in hand.

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[29] No specific data has been compiled to determine how many households from the more traditional Amish affiliations subscribe to *Tägliches Manna*. Based on an informal interview with the chairman, the number seems to be modest but growing. Since none of the bishops on the publication committee come from the traditional Amish groups, and very few members from the Swartzentruber, Kenton, and Andy Weaver Amish contribute material, it is not clear to what extent the thoughts and emphases of this publication reflect the religious views of the most traditional third of the Amish.

What sets traditional Amish church services apart from progressive services is less order or content but more style.[30] The more traditional the Amish, the more likely the minister is to preach in a singsong style with rhythmic tempo, the less likely the listeners are to look directly at the minister as he preaches the sermon, and the less likely the minister is to interpret the Scripture he quotes. Although all Amish believe in the new birth, the more traditional Amish give the subject much less attention, and some explicitly preach against the doctrine of the assurance of salvation—that is, the belief that a person can know that they are in right standing with God.[31] Ministers call listeners to a self-sacrificial life as faithful obligation for being active participants in the people of God.[32] Scripture is frequently employed to identify the characteristics of the people of God in contrast to the citizens of the kingdom of this world.

Although it might be concluded that the Amish, especially the more traditional congregations, believe that they are the only people acceptable to God, when I wrote a bishop from a congregation in the Kenton affiliation, he wrote back noting that he finds himself weak in bringing out the meaning of God's Word and welcoming me to visit "our (we hope it's Gods) small church."[33] A theology of humility permeates Amish thought at every point, shaping the way they approach Scripture.[34]

When the ministers recount the biblical narrative from creation to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, they make an effort to place the

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[30] Traditionalist communities where I have attended church services include Gladwin, Beaverton, Osseo, Stanwood, and Branch County (MI); Monroe and Paoli (IN); Reedsville and McClure (PA); and Circleville, Fredericktown, and Hillsboro (OH), among others. It deserves to be noted that content differences are beginning to arise thanks to some differing points of transmission—namely, counseling ventures and pan-Anabaptist publications.

[31] This type of controversy split the Old Order Amish community in Allen County (IN) in the 2000s. See Christopher Petrovich, "Realignment and Division in the Amish Community of Allen County, Indiana: A Historical Narrative," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 1 (2013): 167–96. Patricia Caldwell notes that Puritans had a "heartfelt longing for peace and safety, for comfort, and, in a word, for assurance" and chalks it up to the political instability of the Commonwealth period. Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 21. When the subject arises in Amish circles, it is nearly always through conversation with evangelical Protestants, and in the specific case of Allen County, against the background of inappropriate moral conduct among Amish youth, popularly known as *Rumspringa*.

[32] Troyer, *Writings of David A. Troyer*, 50.

[33] Personal correspondence, November 25, 2004.

[34] An interesting study of the role that humility plays in guiding language usage is Steven Hartman Keiser, "Religious Identity and the Perception of Linguistic Difference: The Case of Pennsylvania German," *Language & Communication* 42 (2015): 125–34. David Beiler conditions finding rest for the soul in learning the meekness and humility of Christ. Beiler, *Wahre Christentum*, 19.

listeners within God's plan for his people, exhorting them to follow the example of godly men and women of old. The narrative does not make explicit applications of select biblical texts. In their church services, participants discern a message of humility, simplicity, and separation from an ungodly world that is lived out in ways that are similar to what is seen in their own congregations and in the examples observed since adolescence. Since the Amish are notably inward-looking and strongly tend to set themselves within their local (rather than global) context, they have felt no pressure to discover universalizable principles that can be readily transferred to other cultural and historical contexts.

Interpreting Scripture

There are a wide range of approaches to biblical interpretation in the Christian tradition, from the medieval four senses of Scripture to historical-critical and literary analysis. During my ten years as a participant observer, I have never met an Amish person who studied the textual history of the Old or New Testament or learned to read the original languages of the Bible—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Nor have I encountered textual analysis of the original texts or contemporary translations in any context or setting. The one exception was a sermon by a visiting and fairly conservative Old Order mainstream bishop who explained why he believed that the King James Version was the only acceptable version of the Bible for English-language readers. Although this might seem like a fairly "conservative" opinion, that bishop is no longer Amish.[35]

The Amish aversion to textual criticism is rooted in the belief that God preserves the written Word of God, which they equate with the text that is in their hands—Luther's German translation and the King James English translation of the Old and New Testaments, sometimes printed in parallel columns.[36] Questioning the original-language texts that underlie the translations is considered equivalent to questioning the authority of the Luther or King James translation itself. Since authority is an especially

[35] On one occasion, I publicly engaged in textual analysis, in comments at the end of a Sunday school lesson, regarding irregularities in early manuscripts of 1 John 5:7–8. My comments prompted strange looks. Later, I learned that some men considered my comments highly problematic because they are not exposed to textual commentaries and thus unprepared to evaluate my claims. The appearance of superior knowledge put the brothers in an awkward position because even the impression of superior knowledge threatens the concept of equality in the brotherhood.

[36] German-English parallel Bibles printed by Pathway Publishers—an Old Order Amish publishing house in Aylmer, Ontario—are readily available in Amish bookstores.

fundamental topic for the Amish, they are particularly uncomfortable with anything they perceive as undermining the authority of the biblical base of their Christian tradition.

The aversion to textual criticism, however, doesn't keep the Amish from comparing German and English translations, and occasionally comparing the translations to the Hebrew and Greek texts on the basis of simple word studies. Sometimes a comparison between German and English translations provides the reader space to adopt an especially "conservative" interpretation that the older text didn't afford, such as the time a brother in an Old Order Amish congregation glossed the KJV translation of Psalm 10:2: "The wicked in his pride doth persecute the poor: let them be taken in the devices that they have imagined." The brother referred here to "modern devices," specifically hay balers, battery-powered construction tools, and electric power generators, as instruments of pride.

That the Amish do not engage any other modes of scriptural interpretation from Spinoza onward is not surprising, since there are no points of contact between critical biblical scholarship and the Amish. Furthermore, the Amish reject views that strike them as skeptical, rebellious, liberal, or veering toward a nonliteral reading of non-apocalyptic texts. For example, although the Amish believe in six-day creationism, they never have engaged the topic in its own right, nor have they felt the need (as many fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants have) to defend the Bible (or the church or God) from its detractors, Darwin included. As a result, the Amish never were introduced to evolutionary thought (beyond random comments from locals), never learned historical criticism, and didn't familiarize themselves with dispensational theology. As a result, it never occurred to the Amish that the Sermon on the Mount might apply only to a future dispensation rather than being meant for the immediate listeners.[37]

As already noted, Amish ministers are chosen by lot, the same way that Judas's apostolic office was filled (Acts 1:24–26), not through a personal sense of divine calling. It would be considered highly objectionable for an Amish man to state that he feels led to become a minister, and especially offensive if he would "campaign" for the position. Since the Amish reject all forms of higher education beyond the eighth grade, including seminary studies, ordained men are expected to fulfill the ministerial calling through personal reading of Scripture, a range of literature that is better

[37] Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, et al., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 248–63.

described as devotional rather than analytical, the example of older ministers, and feedback received, including words of encouragement from the brotherhood. Extensive memorization and interpretation of Scripture are gained without reading contemporary biblical commentaries or scholarly exegetical literature.

Beyond the Christian Bible, Amish ministers in traditional and mainstream Old Order congregations consult the Dordrecht Confession of Faith; the sixteenth-century *Enchridion* (Handbook) by Dietrich Philips, which is popular because of its defense of strict shunning; the seventeenth-century Anabaptist martyrology titled *Die Märtyrer Spiegel* (*The Martyrs Mirror*);[38] short ministers' manuals; and devotional literature that the minister personally esteems. Most of this literature has a parochial frame of reference and is devotional rather than analytical in flavor and approach.

In terms of biblical commentaries, ministers from traditional Amish congregations consult *Die Auslegen Heilige Schrift* and *Die Auslegen Neues Testament*,[39] which together constitute the seventeenth-century Weimar Bible with extensive commentary, a sort of early modern Lutheran study Bible.[40] The Weimar Bible was expressly written for lay readers, and the commentary is also suited for non-theologians. The commentary is best understood through the lens of its most prominent contributor, Johann Gerhard, a reform-minded but orthodox Lutheran who had, at the tender age of fifteen, turned to his pastor, the famous pietist Johann Arndt (author of the premier Lutheran Pietist text *True Christianity*), when he was experiencing spiritual trials. Later in life, Gerhard helped moderate some

[38] *Die Märtyrer Spiegel* is frequently read in English translation: Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom, From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1938).

[39] *Die Auslegen Heilige Schrift* (Grand Rapids, MI: HeuleGordon, 1979); and *Die Auslegen Neues Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: InnerWorkings, 1991).

[40] The complete German title is *Das Weimarische Bibelwerk. Biblia das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments verdeutscht von Doktor Martin Luther, und auf Herzun Ernst's Verurdnung von etlichen reinen Theologen dem eigentklichen Wortnerstand nach erklart. Nebst Vorreden, Anweisung die heil. Schrift recht zu lessen und zu verstehen, Concordanz, Erklarung der fremden Namen, Harmonie der Evangelisten, vergleichende Tabellen der Gewichte, Munzen, Ellen, u.s.w. u.s.w. welches alles dem christlichen Leser zu mehrern Verstand der heil. Schrift gute Anleitung geben kann*. The Weimar Bible was first issued in Jena in 1640. The second edition, together with the extensive commentary and a second preface by Ernst Salomon Cyprian, was published in 1736. The text was reprinted in 1875, with a new preface by C. F. W. Walther. The Amish currently reprint the 1875 edition.

of Arndt's radical tendencies to keep him palatable to orthodox Protestants.[41]

Henning Graf Reventlow notes that Gerhard's interpretation can be divided into literal, spiritual, allegorical, typological, and analogical readings with the caveat that the reader should never interpret ethical commands, promises, threats, or dogmatic expositions allegorically. Reventlow describes Gerhard's exegesis as precritical, in large measure because he seems unconscious of the historicity of the faith and the church. Gerhard extends the inerrancy of Scripture to all statements pertaining to history and natural science and does not distinguish between the Word of God and Holy Scripture.[42]

Although it might seem counterintuitive that highly traditional Old Order Amish ministers are studying from a Bible commentary written by orthodox Lutherans, the more important point is that Gerhard and his colleagues exhibit a precritical form of exegesis that extends the inerrancy of Scripture to statements regarding history and natural science. The Weimar Bible commentary is concerned with the spiritual workings of the soul, refuses to interpret moral commands allegorically, does not distinguish between Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and is specifically written for nonspecialists. The commentary allows the Amish to maintain their very traditional old German-Swiss appearance (Fraktur script) in their mother tongue (German) without yielding on the topics of the full inerrancy of Scripture, the literal interpretation of moral commands, and the expectation of finding moral lessons applicable to the present day in the Old as much as in the New Testament.[43]

Turning to contemporary writings, the devotional articles in *Tägliches Manna* demonstrate how the New Order and mainstream Old Order Amish interpret the Christian Bible. In the January–February 2021 issue, for example, Old Order Amishman William Yutzy writes about the "elephant in the living room" (hypocrisy) that was an unconfessed sin hidden behind outward religious appearances in the key verse Matthew 23:24: "Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel."[44]

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[41] Douglas H. Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 29, 38–39.

[42] Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 4, From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century*, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 14–22.

[43] This text has circulated among the Amish since the latter 1800s, if not before. It has been received well, especially among the more traditionalist groups, and is printed by Amish based in Lancaster County (PA). However, it has never been appealing to the laity. It is mostly used for sermon preparation.

[44] Hershberger, *Tägliches Manna* (January–February 2021), 2.

Isaiah 5:1–22 (regarding the waywardness of God's people, typified as a wild vineyard) was the reading for the day. Yutzy seamlessly moves from Matthew, to Isaiah, to the present day, the link being the moral/spiritual topic of hypocrisy.

In another example, Leon W. Wengerd employs Hebrews 11:13 ("These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.") to support his devotional meditation titled "Our Legacy" with Romans 12 as the Scripture reading for the day. The Romans text is cited as a model for Christian living—that is, life envisioned as a living sacrifice—with Isaiah's warning to Hezekiah to set his house in order before he dies being a warning for Christians to heed. Even more indicative is the way that Wengerd asks, "Will our children be able to say with the psalmist, 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage' (Ps. 16:6)?" The lines that David refers to are picked up by Wengerd as pointing to "Our Legacy"—that is, the godly heritage of the Amish tradition.[45]

A third devotional sample, penned by New Order Amishman Noah Yoder, is titled "Travail in Hope," with the key verse being Romans 8:25 ("But if we hope for what we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.") and verses 1–30 being the reading for the day. Yoder describes the way that a certain wasp finds a caterpillar, paralyzes it, takes the immobile caterpillar to its burrow, lays an egg on the victim, and then seals the burrow. Immobilized and near at hand, this caterpillar becomes living food for the larvae when it hatches. The caterpillar becomes an analogy for "living sacrifice" but also an example that creation groans, looking forward to the time of the earth's redemption. The creation's groaning is similar to human groaning, in that Christians should expect difficulties and that these difficulties should be approached with hope.[46]

What these devotionals have in common is a lay type of reading that looks to Scripture for practical moral and spiritual guidance for the present moment.[47] These devotionals stop one step short of promoting specific, concrete practices because such decisions are left in the hands of

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[45] Hershberger, *Tägliches Manna* (January–February 2021), 6.

[46] Hershberger, *Tägliches Manna* (January–February 2021), 54.

[47] Theron Schlabach describes the nineteenth-century handling of Scripture as "taking practical insights and guidance. They used Scriptures more as wisdom literature than for strict argument." Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 108.

local congregational leadership,[48] and the publication intends to reach a broad audience of Old Order Mennonite and Amish readers, not just a single congregation or fellowship of like-minded churches.

The four senses of medieval Catholic exegesis delineated by Henri de Lubac include the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic.[49] The Amish read nonapocalyptic texts literally. That includes the creation narratives, Israelite history, and the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, a literal reading of the Sermon on the Mount is the lens through which Amish New Testament theology makes sense. In line with the martyrdom of early Christians in the Roman Empire, the Amish literally expect to be persecuted. Whereas contemporary Protestant Christians often seek counseling when they become depressed, many Amish consider mourning a necessary element of Christian life and are therefore much less likely to seek counseling.[50] More controversially, their literal reading of the Sermon on the Mount continues into verse 22 about anger putting us at risk of hellfire, verse 34 about refusing to take an oath (even in a courtroom), verse 39 about not resisting an evil person, and verse 42 about lending to whoever asks and not asking anything in exchange, and not asking that what was borrowed be returned. In general, these verses are interpreted quite literally, although Amish people do get angry at times, there are Amish congregations (and persons) that are not reconciled with each other, no Amish person has ever gouged out his eye or cut off his hand, and an Amish person has refused to give something that was asked of them. Continuing a sixteenth-century Anabaptist practice, the Amish are so steadfast about refusing to take an oath that they petitioned the United States government to allow them to "affirm" a statement rather than swear to its truthfulness. The Amish refusal to sue to recover something stolen is another example of the extent to which they read the Sermon on the Mount texts literally.[51]

The interpretation of apocalyptic texts varies considerably. The vast majority of Amish tend to read apocalyptic texts as a blend of history,

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[48] Werner Enninger and Joachim Raith, *An Ethnography-of-Communication Approach to Ceremonial Situations: A Study on Communication in Institutionalized Social Contexts; The Old Order Amish Church Service* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982).

[49] Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

[50] Over the past few decades, the more progressive Old Order Amish have begun providing counseling for particularly troubled youth and marriages. Steven M. Nolt, "Moving beyond Stark Options: Old Order Mennonite and Amish Approaches to Mental Health," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (2011): 133–51.

[51] Paton Yoder, "The Amish View of the State," in *The Amish and the State*, ed. Donald B. Kraybill (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 38–39.

metaphor, and prophecy. There are some notable exceptions to the largely metaphorical reading of the book of Revelation. Based on the Amish effort to discern the times in which they live, many believe that "the mark of the beast" (Rev. 13:17) could be a credit card–type chip embedded in the forearm or forehead. This interpretation fits quite well with the idea found in verse 17 that no one can (literally) buy or sell without the mark (the chip) but fits less well with other texts in which the mark is understood as voluntary (14:9, 11; 20:4) and the author's observation that the mark of the beast is connected with worship of the beast and/or his image (14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Given that the Father's name is depicted as being written on the foreheads of the 144,000 elect (14:1), it seems likely that the mark is metaphorical, signifying allegiance rather than an actual physical marking. Amish persons who consider the mark of the beast to be a computer chip embedded in the forearm or forehead interpret Revelation 13:17 as a mysterious hint about a concrete plan of the world system in the midst of an otherwise metaphorical text.[52]

The Amish are strong literalists in regard to historical narrative (Adam and Eve and a literal snake, six-day creation, etc.) while interpreting prophecy through symbol and metaphor, switching back to literal readings of the psalms and proverbs. Making a fairly sharp distinction between prophecy and historical narrative is a characteristic of Amish interpretation of Scripture.

Perhaps the most frequent reading of the scriptural text is for the moral sense, as noted by Mennonite historian John S. Oyer.[53] Whether reading the books of Moses, the Judges and Prophets, the Psalms and Proverbs, or the Gospels and Epistles, the primary purpose of the Old and New Testaments is the proper ordering of the moral universe. "Order" (in German *Ordnung*) is a key to understanding Amish theology. The relationship between man and God is structured as affection toward the Almighty, but it is love that reveals itself in obedience, as obedient affection, based in part on John 14:15: "If you love me, keep my commands" (NIV). Nineteenth-century Holmes County bishop David A. Troyer put it this way: "Now we already see that [based on John 14:15, 21] we cannot love him, unless we are willing to observe everything that he commanded and instructed us through his faithful followers and holy

[52] This interpretation was explicitly stated when I attended a church service in Paoli, Indiana. The members of this highly traditionalist Kenton-affiliated community forbid the use of bank accounts, social security and exemption numbers, and mailboxes with house numbers. Thomas J. Meyers and Steven M. Nolt, *An Amish Patchwork: Indiana's Old Orders in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 50–51.

[53] Oyer, "Is There an Amish Theology?," 278–79, 283, 286.

apostles. And we find such commands and instructions throughout the New Testament. And unless we carry out these commands, our faith in Christ is entirely wanting, indeed, is vain and dead."[54]

Taking a recent issue of *Tägliches Manna* as an example, we see that the sixty articles cover the following moral topics: criticism, honesty, unity, obedience, humility, purity, motives, fairness, the law of God, gossiping, cooperation, and generosity. If morality is understood from the perspective of virtue ethics, the moral topics in the March–April 2021 issue also include courage, patience, endurance, prayer, and (especially) faith. Being a devotional publication, it is not surprising that the topics in *Tägliches Manna* are moral and spiritual in nature. However, few other topics of theological interest are engaged.[55] The moral sense is the chief sense of Scripture for the Amish, with both testaments as grist for the interpretive mill.

Applying the Word of God

The Amish view Christianity more as a way of life than a creed, and salvation more as a process than a sudden spiritual awakening.[56] If Christian salvation entails more than just a heroic (initial) act of faith, if it entails confession, redemption, and renewal, then this implies movement toward something new, toward something that is not natural to humankind in its fallen condition.[57] Although the Amish teach salvation by faith in the Lutheran-Augustinian sense of faith as event, they go beyond mere creedal belief and an initial (instrumental) act of faith in God that leads to conversion. Salvation is understood as deliverance from an old life of death to a new life in a new kingdom with a new king. As much as they value the doctrine of justification by faith, they give it much less emphasis than other Protestant traditions, focusing instead on the outworking of the faith. They understand the writer's rebuke to Jewish Christians in Hebrews 5:13–14 as applying to those who talk much about

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[54] Troyer, *Writings of David A. Troyer*, 104–5.

[55] A historical exception would be the Essingen *Ordnungsbrief* of 1779, which enjoins European Amish congregants to "avoid unnecessary disputations" about the incarnation of Christ. Leroy Beachy, *Unser Leit: The Story of the Amish*, vol. 2 (Millersburg, OH: Goodly Heritage Books, 2011), 313.

[56] For a useful discussion of the contrast between conversion-as-process versus conversion-as-event, see Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

[57] David A. Troyer puts it this way: "For as long as a person does not conduct himself completely according to God and his word and does not try to wholly surrender or suppress his natural disposition [Natur] which is constantly inclined to evil, that long he will not be heard by God in his rebellious requests and cunning tricks." Troyer, *Writings of David A. Troyer*, 50.

topics such as salvation, conversion, and new birth without that faith leading to a distinct Christian lifestyle. The Amish posture toward Scripture is that they expect God to teach them, by means of the text, how to live in the light of Christ, and they strive to apply this learning in concrete ways (known as *Ordnung*) in Christian communities (*Gemeinde*), building on the tradition that was laid down by their Anabaptist and Old Order Amish ancestors, with the instrumental act of faith as the initial step into this dynamic relationship and conversation.[58]

After their Swiss ancestors fled to North America in the middle of the nineteenth century based on the guarantee of liberty of conscience to all, the Old Order Amish of Adams County (IN) petitioned the government for exemptions from oath taking and military service. In their Articles of Faith, published around the middle of the twentieth century, the Old Order Amish of Adams County reveal their understanding of the Bible (and specifically the New Testament) this way: "We believe that Christ is our Savior, whom we should respect, adore and love above all things, and whose command in His Word we are to obey faithfully. We believe that there is no other Savior except Christ and that He has given His New Testament as a safe guide in which He gives us His advice and divine will."[59] This statement reflects the Amish belief in Christ as Savior together with love and affection toward him (manifested as "respect"). Obedience to the divine will is emphasized, and the New Testament is understood to be the guide for life.[60] To take one example of a unique moral reading, expounded in preparatory and communion services in the Pearisburg Old Order Amish community, Jesus's act of riding a donkey for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem was read as an ethical example rather than as a prophetic act set within the frame of redemption history: Jesus's action provided a model of humility to be emulated in the Christian life of believers.

The Old Order Amish of Adams County explain why they don't take revenge for wrongs committed against them in terms of Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3; Zechariah 9:8–9; Matthew 5:39, 44; 7:12; Romans 12:14, 19–20; 2 Corinthians 4:2; and 1 Peter 3:9. It is notable how Old Testament texts

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[58] Steven M. Nolt theorizes the Amish as a "community in conversation." Nolt, "Who Are the Real Amish? Rethinking Diversity and Identity among a Separate People," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82 (2008): 386–87.

[59] David L. Schwartz, *Articles of Faith of the Old Order Amish Mennonite Church, Berne, Indiana*, n.d.

[60] The introduction to the *Articles of Faith* is followed by explanations of the three topics at hand, titled "The Office of Magistracy and Secular Power," "We Do Not Take Any Oath of Any Form," and "Revenge."

are brought into the present time. Most Christian commentators place the events referred to in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 in the distant future. By contrast, rather than concerning themselves with the dating of a future beating of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks or placing such events within the trajectory of world history, the Amish believe that these events are fulfilled in and through the present body of Christ.

The Amish handling of these texts reveals how their belief that Christ reigns through the church in the present era hangs together with their belief that many Old Testament texts, even prophetic texts with symbolic imagery, yield present-day applications. Extensive use of the Old Testament and prophetic texts for moral instruction sets Amish exegesis apart from much of present-day Protestant interpretation but reveals remarkable continuity with the sixteenth-century Swiss Brethren handling of the two testaments and their relationship to Christian ethics and exegesis.[61]

Perhaps the most fascinating question is how the Amish move from their reading of the biblical text to their unique lifestyle. The Amish practice a congregational form of church government. As a result, the rules that regulate Amish life are decided on a local level.[62] In organizational and geographic terms, the Amish are divided into affiliations, settlements, and church districts.[63] With hundreds of years of history behind them, the rules of Amish congregations were not made at

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[61] See, for example, Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters, trans., *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), introduction, xii–xiv.

[62] Local decisions are not made in a vacuum. Forces within fellowships of Amish churches encourage uniformity of faith and practice. And decisions made during times of extended controversy sometimes play an outsized role in local decision-making. A few of these decisions have been formalized in ministerial *Diener Beschluß*, composed in 1917 (in response to the Swartzentruber split), in 1939 (which defined the boundaries of acceptable Amish behavior in the large Holmes County, Ohio, settlement), and in 1955 (which built on the 1917 *Diener Beschluß* and was interpreted by the Andy Weaver Amish as requiring the practice of strict shunning and recognizing the discipline of every other Amish church). For copies of original source documents, see Byler, *Alte Schreibens*, 71–79; for English translations, consult Dan Raber, Gregory Sheets, and Cory Anderson, "Ordnungs Briefen of 1865, 1917, and 1939: English Translations of Important Old Amish Church Orders," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 7 (2019): 109–14; and Gregory Sheets and Cory Anderson, "An Account of the 1955 Ministerial Assembly in Holmes and Wayne Counties, OH: An English Translation of Joseph E. Peachey's Allgemeine Diener Versammlung Den 26, 27, 28, Sept. 1955 [General Ministerial Assembly, September 26th, 27th, and 28th, 1955]," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 7 (2019): 163–68.

[63] Regarding the dynamics of church district formation and partitioning, see Scot Long and Richard Moore, "Amish Church District Fissioning and Watershed Boundaries among Holmes County, Ohio, Amish," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 2 (2014): 186–202.

a moment's notice. Instead, they are understandings that have developed across time and are recounted by the local ministers twice a year in preparation for communion services. Since these rules change over time, they are hardly ever written down beyond the notes kept by the bishop and ministers of the congregation.[64] When rules are written down, the document is known as an *Ordnungsbrief* (standard of practice). Although there are almost as many standards of practice as there are congergations,[65] these standards of practice are the best point of entry for understanding how the Amish apply the Word of God in practical ways.

Events from the distant past continue to inspire and shape present standards of Amish congregations, and the common historical narrative begins with the emergence of the Amish from the Swiss Brethren division in the 1690s as a distinct group in Alsace and Switzerland. They were distinguishable from the Reistians (later called Mennonites) by excommunicating liars, shunning the excommunicated in daily activities, practicing the ordinance of foot washing, and refusing to recognize the *Treuherzige* (true-hearted—i.e., non-Anabaptist supporters) as Christians.[66] The first major division that shook the Amish communities in North America occurred in the 1850s and 1860s. Known as "the Great Schism," the Amish split into Amish-Mennonite and Old Order Amish groups. The Amish-Mennonites favored a more lenient application of shunning and approved of new dress patterns and musical tastes, while the Old Orders rejected photography, new dress styles, and innovations in congregational

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[64] There are a few exceptions to this rule. After parting ways with their Allen County Amish brethren, the families that started the Daviess County (IN) community wrote a short *Ordnungsbrief* titled simply "The *Ordnungsbrief* of 1871." Although this is a genuine *Ordnungsbrief*, it is not the type that would be used in preparation for the communion service because it only addresses a number of controversial issues that the new settlement hoped to resolve differently than the Amish community they moved away from. Joseph Stoll, *The Amish in Daviess County, Indiana* (LaGrange, IN: self-pub., 1997), 20–30. The short-lived Piketon (OH) settlement that was scuttled after the federal government planned to construct a nuclear power plant in the immediate vicinity is another example. "Ordnung of a Christian Church" (Piketon, OH: Pike County Amish Church, 1950).

[65] When a congregation becomes too large for services to be held in homes, the congregation is divided geographically into two congregations. The "new" congregation starts with identical standards of practice but might, over time, come to differ from the mother congregation.

[66] For English translations of the primary source documents, see John D. Roth, *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 2002). For a list of published primary sources, see appendix D. Leo Schelbert interprets the Amish as fundamentally opposed to Pietism because of its separatism, a characteristic of some Pietist groups. Schelbert, *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 118–27. Cf. Marcus Meier and Dennis L. Slabaugh, trans., *The Origin of the Schwarzenau Brethren* (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 2008), 59–62.

worship patterns. By the end of the century, most Amish-Mennonites had merged with the Mennonites. The people known today as Amish are the descendants of the Old Order branch.[67]

For their part, the Old Order Amish experienced multiple rifts in the twentieth century.[68] The ultra-traditional Swartzentruber Amish split away from the rest of the Old Orders in 1918, and soon afterward the Swartzentruber Amish split multiple times, forming a range of ultra-traditional Amish groups.

The second major split happened in 1955. This division centered on issues of church polity—whether a congregation was necessarily required to recognize the church discipline of another Amish congregation and whether a member of an Old Order Amish congregation could go to a plain Anabaptist congregation that allowed automobile usage without being excommunicated and shunned for taking that step. Bishop Andy Weaver led the traditionalist side of the division, insisting that Amish persons may not go to a car-driving church without being excommunicated and shunned and that the church discipline of another Amish church must always be recognized—that is, another congregation may not receive a disciplined person into its membership, even if they believe the disciplinary action was unnecessary or wrong. These splits resulted in published ministerial statements known as *Diener Beschlußen*. The congregations that align with a particular *Diener Beschluß* maintain that document as a part of its memory and make decisions in light of its contents.

Taking a concrete example of change, the Old Order Amish congergation in Greenfield (OH) traces its roots to the traditionalist side of the 1955 split. As a result, members see themselves as Amish (not Mennonites), as Old Orders (not Amish-Mennonites), and as Andy Weaver (not mainstream Old Orders). And since a published copy of the 1955 *Diener Beschluß* (with notes) includes comments critical of a Protestant understanding of justification (even though not part of the statement approved by the ministers), numerous members in the Greenfield community consider it necessary to resist the idea that a Christian can (and/or should) experience the assurance of salvation.[69]

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[67] Paton Yoder, *Tradition and Transition: Amish Mennonites and Old Order Amish, 1800–1900* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1991).

[68] For this reason, Leroy Beachy refers to the twentieth century as the "Century of Division." Beachy, *Unser Leit*, 395–473.

[69] John Y. Schlabach, *Begebenheiten von die Alte Amishe Gemeinde von Holmes und Wayne County, Ohio und Adams County, Indiana von 1938 biss zu 1958* (Gordonville, PA: Gordonville Print Shop, 1968).

The final historical layer for this congregation is the founding of the Greenfield settlement in 2006. The first families and founding bishop of the Greenfield settlement moved from the Fredericktown (OH) community, which is known for its firm stand on the traditional side of the 1955 division and for maintaining a rather conservative lifestyle (for example, married persons still use kerosene lanterns for lighting on their buggies). The families that started the Greenfield community wanted to allow bulk milk tanks so that they could ship Grade A milk rather than canned milk. They were looking for cheaper land and wanted to switch over to certified organic farming as part of a wider strategy for enabling small farms to be profitable, thereby enabling men to return to the farm, to work at home with their families. The Fredericktown community objected to the use of bulk milk tanks, battery lights and mirrors on buggies, and LED battery lights in houses and threatened to sever fellowship with the Greenfield congregation. The Fredericktown community considered these innovations too technologically progressive.[70]

Nevertheless, the Greenfield community managed to stay within the Andy Weaver fold, and through their efforts, the concept of what it means to be Andy Weaver Amish broadened slightly and has given new vigor to the historic practice of men working at home. In fact, the Fredericktown community afterward voted in favor of bulk milk tanks.

The Greenfield approach can be described as very traditional Old Order Amish but with a desire to find creative ways to uphold those values—for example, the importance of a father teaching his children (Deut. 6:6–7; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4), a task that can hardly be accomplished if he is gone every day on construction sites. They upheld their Christian church tradition through select appropriation of modern technology, harnessing technology for the good of the community.[71] For example, although the Greenfield community does not use storm fronts on buggies, they do allow battery lights and mirrors for safety reasons. They also allow portable LED lights for lighting homes because these lights are considered healthier than burning kerosene lamps. Still, electric cookstoves are not allowed because that would require electric generators. These historical layers are critical for understanding their approach to Scripture.

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[70] For an explanation of the Andy Weaver approach to technology, see Christopher G. Petrovich, "Technology in the Service of Community: Identity and Change Among the Andy Weaver Amish," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88 (2014): 23–44.

[71] Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 236.

Members of the Greenfield community do not approach Scripture with a clean slate. They do not move from a particular biblical text to the conclusion that they should, or should not, drive automobiles or use bulk milk tanks. Instead, they read the Bible to learn what type of persons they should become, and then they apply that reading to their particular circumstances. They find this approach in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (NIV). They first seek to become mature in the faith, expecting that afterward they will understand how to relate to the patterns of the world.

The Amish typically consider their parents and grandparents as reliable examples and thus accept their lifestyle as their starting point, their example of how not to conform to the patterns of this world while trying to build healthy families and communities that reflect the reign of Christ. If, after treading the path of discipleship for some time, their understanding differs too much from the consensus of the community, individuals have to decide whether to adjust themselves in light of the convictions of others or relocate to a settlement that aligns more closely with their convictions.[72]

This is the very process that led to the formation of the Greenfield community. Considering it more important for men to work at home with their families on the farm than to refuse the use of bulk milk tanks, and thereby enabling their small family farms to become profitable again, they opted to relocate. This was the only peaceable option because the leadership of the Fredericktown community resisted the idea of bulk

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[72] A remarkable example of this dynamic is the mid-twentieth-century Amish attempt to establish a settlement in Honduras, in part inspired by the mid-century "Amish mission movement." Steve Nolt, "The Amish 'Mission Movement' and the Reformulation of Amish Identity in the Twentieth Century," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (2001): 7–36. See Cory Anderson and Jennifer Anderson, "The Amish Settlement in Honduras, 1968–1978: A (Half) Failed Attempt to Develop an Amish Understanding of Mission," *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 4 (2016): 1–50. Three former residents of the settlement have written firsthand accounts of their time in Honduras: Joseph Stoll, *Sunshine and Shadow: Our Seven Years in Honduras* (Aylmer, ON: Joseph Stoll, 1996); Monroe Hochstetler, *Life and Times in Honduras: Twenty Families Struggle in Honduras* (Worthington, IN: self-pub., 2007); and Jerry Eicher, *My Amish Childhood: A True Story of Faith, Family, and the Simple Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013). Cf. Cory Anderson, "Religiously Motivated Migration," *Sociological Quarterly* 57 (2016): 387–414; Cory Anderson and Loren Kenda, "What Kinds of Places Attract and Sustain Amish Populations?," *Rural Sociology* 80 (2015): 483–511; James Landing, "The Old Order Amish: Problem Solving through Migration," *Bulletin of the Illinois Geographical Society* 17 (1975): 36–48; and Dachang Cong, "Amish Factionalism and Technological Change: A Case Study of Kerosene Refrigerators and Conservatism," *Ethnology* 31 (1992): 205–14.

tanks. Scriptural application is not always so consequential. But in tight-knit communities where new practices are met with skepticism, changes are not made if there is more than one dissenting voice. Conformity to community decisions is expected, and so confrontations of this type happen more frequently than elsewhere. This is the primary reason for the diversity of Amish groups.

The Amish of all stripes read Scripture quite literally, expect moral guidance at every turn, and apply the message to their present situations, frequently waiting to make major changes from the pattern they received from their parents and grandparents until they feel that they have reached a mature understanding of the Christian faith.[73] The slowness of change is, at least in part, a result of an ecclesiological model that assumes that the wisdom of tradition is appropriate for the present time unless a change is agreed to by all but one dissenting voice in the community of faith.[74] As nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Amish bishop David Beiler put it, "We have received *Ordnungen* [standards] from our forefathers and teachers, who thought them to be good and profitable . . . and, I think, kept house due to conviction. It might be suitable here, to quote Sirach who says: 'Do not consider yourself wiser than the elders; for they have also learned from their fathers.'"[75]

Conclusion

The Amish are readily identified by their horse-drawn transportation, wide-brimmed hats and bonnets, and German-language church services held in members' homes. They are frequently depicted as "the quiet in the land," an ethnic community that lives in relative isolation from broader society and with too little formal education to be relevant to the history of Protestant biblical interpretation. Even when the subject of biblical interpretation is broached, outside observers tend to assume that the

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[73] During a visit to an Andy Weaver congregation in central Ohio in the summer of 2010, a visiting minister from Hillsboro (KY) made reference to the faith handed down by "unser Vorfetter" (our forefathers). During lunch, I asked him who he was referring to when he cited "our forefathers" as the basis of his message. He didn't have a clear answer for me. Locals jumped in and identified them as early Anabaptists who were persecuted by the state church and whose stories are recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*. This might have been true for the interlocutors, but later that day, in a private conversation, a friend (who has personally known the visiting minister since childhood) said that the visiting minister relies more on what his father and grandfather preached than distant historical sources he has probably never read.

[74] Christopher G. Petrovich, "Amish Ecclesiology: Plural-Elder Congregationalism, Governing Lines of Fellowship, and Envisioning the Church," in *Ecclesiology* (forthcoming).

[75] Beiler, *Wahre Christentum*, 42.

Amish scan the biblical text for rules, isolating concepts from the text and later reapplying these tidy culture-less "principles" to their daily lives.

On the contrary, due to their precritical reading of the biblical text, the Amish handle the scriptural text as an organic unity in which sharp distinctions between culture, text, and principles are not conceivable. Instead of searching for a timeless message to be applied in the present age,[76] the Amish interpret the Bible with the example of their immediate family members and ancestors as the starting point and apply the biblical message to situations they face in their shared cultural and geographical space across time.

In the case of the automobile, all Amish agree not to drive because their ancestors set this standard, and they, at the very least, find no morally compelling reason to alter it. However, in the case of the bulk milk tanks, technological and economic circumstances prompted families in the Fredericktown (OH) community to rethink the implications of not using the tanks in light of their understanding of the importance of working at home with their families, with their hands in the soil. Although the Amish interpret the Bible in very similar ways, geographic and economic circumstances frequently differ between communities, and topics of symbolic importance are sometimes glossed in slightly different ways, resulting in the menagerie of Amish groups that grace the North American landscape in the twenty-first century. Theological assumptions about the church, the text, and tradition unify their premodern, precritical narrative interpretation of Scripture, while differences surface as they gloss subjects somewhat differently, always in dynamic conversation with one another.[77] The Amish are among the few Protestant traditions that have continuously maintained a precritical hermeneutic of Scripture, in large part because of the heavily local focus and the general disinterest in anthropological findings that might stir an interest in universalizing the biblical message for a global context.

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[76] Keith D. Stanglin notes that cultural assumptions can be more meaningful than methods of interpretation. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 154. Cf. Hans Frei, who observes that "mediating theology, firmly committed to the positivity of Christian religion, nonetheless succeeded in reversing the direction of the interpretation of the biblical stories from precritical days, so that they now made sense by their inclusion in a wider frame of meaning." Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 127.

[77] Steven M. Nolt has described the Amish as a community-in-conversation. Nolt, "Who Are the Real Amish?," 377–94.

RESEARCH GRANTS

The Mennonite Historical Society announces an "Open Research Grant" of $2,500 to promote research and publication in Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. To apply, send the following materials by March 1, 2023, to Carrie Phillips (phillipsc@bluffton.edu), Secretary, Mennonite Historical Society, c/o Musselman Library, Bluffton University, 1 University Drive, Bluffton, OH 45817: a two- or three-page summary of the project stating its significance to the field of Anabaptist-Mennonite history, a budget of anticipated expenses, a vitae, and one letter of recommendation. All applicants must be members of the Mennonite Historical Society. Recipients of the award will be announced at the May meeting of the MHS Board of Directors. Disbursements will be made by June 1. The Prize Selection Committee may choose not to award the grant if none of the applications are deemed acceptable. The *Mennonite Quarterly Review* has the "right of first refusal" for scholarly articles that result from research funded by the grant.

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