

## **What We Can Learn from the Mennonites and Amish**

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As many of you have probably already leafed through the bulletin and seen the title of the message today, you may be wondering about the specifics of the sermon. Are we going to talk about the benefits of giving up our cars and driving buggies? Is Gabe going to encourage us to park our John Deeres and mow our lawns with ground-driven push mowers? And by the way, just what qualifies Gabe to give a message like this anyway?

Well, my reason for giving this message is to better acquaint our congregation and Christians in general with probably the most misunderstood group of Christians of all denominations and beliefs. I'm certainly not the best qualified person to speak on this topic; in fact, I'm probably not well qualified at all. However, I was voted the most likely to become Amish by the Dryden High School class of 1998. I do interact with members of the various Amish and Mennonite groups throughout upstate NY on a weekly basis a part of my job as a Dairy Nutritionist. I have come to have a deep respect and admiration for these people and their faith. I wish to share that with you all this morning.

Some of you may be surprised to learn that upstate NY is home to thousands of Amish and Mennonite families. From WNY to the FL region to the North Country there are at least 7 different conferences of Mennonites and 3 different groups of Amish communities. Nearly every upstate county has some Amish or Mennonite families within its borders now. This spring about 20 Amish families moved from a Western PA settlement comprised of 500 families into the Marathon area. Likely, dozens more Amish families will follow. The nearest Amish farms to our church are now about 15 minutes away.

### **History and Origins**

The Amish and Mennonite churches started from common roots in the early 1500's at the time of the protestant reformation. While the protestant reformers rejected many tenants of the Catholic Church, they continued to practice infant baptism and state involvement with the church. A group of reformers rejected the notion of infant baptism and believed that the Bible taught that the church should be a group of voluntary adults, baptized upon confession of faith and separated from the world and state.

These early believers were nicknamed "Anabaptists" because they re-baptized adults upon confession of faith in Christ. The followers of this movement referred to themselves as the "brethren" and today will use that title or the title of "Plain people" when collectively referring to the Amish and Mennonite community. The early followers of the Anabaptist movement were severely persecuted by both the Protestants and Catholics for there beliefs. Due to their separation from state involvement in the affairs of the church, they were rarely welcome in any country. They were burned, beheaded,

beaten, drowned, stoned, imprisoned, and exiled by the thousands. The leaders were martyred so rapidly that no one leader unified the movement for many years. Yet through all of this persecution the church continued meeting secretly and grew greatly in numbers. Staying true to their belief in peaceable living, they endured persecution without retaliation or violence. One historical account of an early martyr is that of Dirk Willems. Dirk was being persecuted and pursued by a sheriff when the sheriff fell through the ice of a frozen lake. Dirk turned back, pulled the sheriff to safety and was then arrested and burned at the stake for his beliefs in 1569. This story exemplifies the Brethren's early and continuing commitment to not only their non-violent ways, but also their love of all neighbors and as Christ commanded a love of our enemies.

Since their beginnings in the early 1500's, the Brethren split into various groups over the subsequent centuries. In 1693, a Mennonite elder named Jacob Amman broke from the Mennonite church and his followers became known as the Amish. Continuing church splits over various issues have led to the dozens of Amish and Mennonite groups that exist around the world today. Generally, Mennonites are more progressive technologically than the Amish groups. However, there are Amish who drive cars and Mennonites who do not. There are Amish groups that rely on tractors for field work and Mennonites who only use horse drawn implements. There are Mennonite groups who are completely "modern" with no distinction in dress or use of technology. Mennonites meet in church buildings while the Amish worship in each other's homes. Neither the Amish nor the Mennonites have paid clergy. The bishops, deacons (who handle church finances), and ministers volunteer their services.

The two groups with which I am most familiar are the Weaverland and Eastern PA Mennonite conferences of the Cayuga and Seneca County areas. I have attended church at an Eastern PA church and have many people that I count as friends among both conferences. Both of these groups drive cars and use modern farm equipment. Most of it more modern than what I use! These groups dress plainly with the men and boys generally wearing plain button-down shirts and jeans or work slacks. The women and girls wear dresses generally with a print pattern of flowers or colors. Although I have seen John Deere logo print used also! Alexandra is wearing a dress made by Regina Horning, a friend of ours in the Weaverland conference. This dress is typical for young girls of their church in pattern and style. All women wear a prayer covering or bonnet in accordance with 1 Corinthians 11:4-7.

There are many things that the "Plain People" value that have seemingly become lost or at least lost in priority with the modern pace and practice of life. I want to look at several of these things that are valued by these Christian people and hopefully encourage us to see the wisdom and purpose behind their beliefs and practices.

### **1. The Value of Simplicity - Psalm 46:10**

The "plain people" lead a very simple life. They are not as easily distracted by the glitz and glamour of modern life and materialism. Their homes are quiet and peaceful without the constant chatter from a TV or two. To varying degrees, the Mennonites and Amish

are selective about the technology that they bring into their homes and communities. Two reasons for the non-use of various forms of technology are:

1. To limit the potential for evil worldly influences to enter the community and...
2. The impact of technology on the life of the community.

For example: The Mennonite groups with which I am the most familiar, the Weaverland and Eastern groups do not use radios, TV, or general internet. This is to keep worldly influences of sinful sex, language and violence out of their homes and kids' minds. These groups do use computers for record-keeping and business e-mail, GPS and computers in their trucks and tractors, cassette and CD players for Christian pre-recorded music. An example of the impact on technology being limited to benefit the community would be the groups who use horse and buggy transportation. They do so in part because the mobility of a community can threaten the integrity of that community. Horse and buggy transportation encourages reliance on those close by. Rarely if ever are "plain" children seen playing video games, this is because they are busy working and spending time with their families or playing outside with their friends and neighbors. I just heard of a massive study that was done and determined that American teenagers spend 11 hours per day on average in front of a screen of some kind. Be it a cell-phone, TV, computer or iPod, this is changing the way that American children think and interact (or don't interact) with their families and peers.

## **2. The Value of Community and Identity – Acts 2:44-46**

One of the reasons that Amish or Mennonites stand out in an area is that there is never only one. Community is essential to their existence. When I was talking with Allen Bieler, one of the Old Order Amish to move into the Marathon area, he kept referring to the rest of "our people" in the group in Western PA. He said that if more farm land became available, more of "our people" would certainly be interested in coming. I began to think if there is a group of people in my life with whom I would so strongly identify myself as a member to claim as "my group". As a nation we rarely identify ourselves by nationality anymore as in "my people being Irish or Italian or whatever". Americans have become so much a melting pot that we have lost a sense of identity or permanent place of belonging. When NY Times Bestselling author on Amish life Beverly Lewis was asked what aspect of Amish culture she would like to see implemented into popular culture today, she responded "A place to belong. Our modern society has stolen our sense of belonging, and we're losing our ability to deeply connect – casting aside intimate relationships for the more casual social networking associations." The Amish and Mennonites are experts at connecting, forming relationships, and maintaining a sense of community and belonging.

There is an Eastern PA Mennonite church south of Boston, MA. They frequently meet in downtown Boston as an outreach ministry. A single Mom from Maine between 3 and 4 hours north of the city began attending their services in Boston and wanted to join the church. Custody regulations did not let her reside outside of the state of Maine. Rather than have her continue to travel 3-4 hours one way with her children to be a part of the

congregation, 3 other families packed up their things, sold their homes and moved to Maine to plant a new church and allow this single Mom and her kids be a part of their community. Another friend of mine said that this sort of thing is not out of the ordinary for the Mennonite church. To what extent would we as a congregation go to facilitate a new member to be a part of our Christian community?

### **3. The Value of Bearing One Another's Burdens – Galatians 6:2**

One of the unique aspects of community life is the level to which Amish and Mennonite families support one another in times of need. There will be 5 or 6 new dairy barns built in the Marathon area this summer. When I asked one of the Amish men about the work to be done, he said "It's not that much, you get 40-50 guys together that know how to close their mouths and use their hands and we can build a barn in a day."

I know of one Mennonite dairy that was milking almost 300 cows. Their milk house and parlor caught fire one night between 3 and 4 AM. The fire department showed up and was putting the fire out right away, but much damage was done to the barn and milking equipment. So many neighbors showed up that by noon cows were all moved to neighboring dairies to be milked and the debris was cleared away. By 4 PM, about 12 hours after the fire began, the first trusses were set for the new parlor.

The Mennonite communities that I work with are also self-insured amongst one-another rather than carrying commercial fire and storm insurance. Within the Weaverland Conference, each member appraises their property to be insured (cows, equipment, homes, businesses, or barns). At the end of the year the total losses paid out to the community by the church deacons is calculated and each member pays in based on their percentage of the total community insured value. For example, if the total insured value of the entire community is \$1,000,000,000 (One billion dollars) and one farm has an insured value of \$1,000,000 (One million dollars); then they would pay into the church insurance fund .1% of the losses incurred that year. So if the losses incurred by the community were \$500,000, that farm would pay \$500 in premiums. One farm that I know of has an insured value of \$900,000 and his premiums have averaged \$400 per year for the last 5 years. My farm's insured value is less than half this and my premiums are over \$2500 per year.

Additionally no one in the conservative Amish or Mennonite groups carries health insurance. They pay cash for all medical bills. If they cannot afford a medical bill for their family, the church steps in and pays the difference. Twice a year in the Weaverland Church the funds for medical needs are made known and every member contributes to the medical fund in a free-will offering as they are able. Under this system, hospitals and doctors typically take about 30% off the bill to be paid cash and avoid the hassles of insurance.

The care of neighbor extends beyond their own communities. Mennonite Disaster Service is one of the first response teams to show up and last to leave for many natural disasters, be it hurricanes in the south or snow storms in the North Country. A few years

ago when there were huge lake-effect snows up north, a bus of Mennonite men and boys loaded up and headed north to shovel barn and home roofs. They were given a list of elderly from the Red Cross and set to work.

#### **4. The Value of Marriage and Children – Matthew 5:32**

The divorce rate among Amish and Mennonites is effectively 0. Of the tens of thousands of Amish and Mennonite couple across this country, you can probably count the divorces in the last 50 years on one hand. Beyond that, all of the couples that I know are happily married, not just because they “have to be”. These people understand and apply the Biblical roles of husband and wife described in Scripture in Ephesians 5 and Titus 2:3. Men are head of the household, lovers of their wives, and disciplers of their children. Women are submissive and respectful to their husbands and keepers at home. These Biblical roles that have been lost to many in modern society are still practiced among the “plain people” and the result is generation after generation of intact, happy, functional, faithful, and loving families.

The Amish and Mennonites see that children are a blessing from the Lord. Psalm 127:5 says of children “Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them”. Interestingly, the average quiver at the time of this Psalm being written held about 7 arrows. The average conservative Amish or Mennonite family has about 7 children. Children take part in the daily life of the home or farm or family business. Their contribution to the community is vital to their success. About 95% of conservative Amish and Mennonite children choose to join the church and continue in their parents’ faith and way of life. Compare this to the recent Gallup survey that recently showed that over 2/3 of youth in other Christian churches will leave the faith. Due to the birth rate and retention rate of young people, the conservative Amish and Mennonite churches double in membership about every 20 years. It is also interesting to note that adoption is not uncommon among the Mennonite communities with whom I interact. I have met many Mennonite adults and children that became part of their families through adoption either domestically or internationally.

#### **5. The Value of Education – Proverbs 4:7**

Many outside the Amish or Mennonite communities think that they are backward, ignorant, and uneducated. This is hardly the case. The adults and children that I know are very intelligent and well educated. Their young people receive a quality education at their own private schools or through home-schooling. Their schools go through 8<sup>th</sup> grade followed by on year of vocational study and they then enter the work force or business. While on one farm that I work with, I asked the father about cows that have calved recently and he deferred the question to his son of no more than 8 or 9 years who answered my questions. I later found a notebook in the farm office with the boy’s name on it and all of the cow records for the last 2 years! This young man is certainly not ignorant or uneducated! Another couple that I know had their son take the SATs after finishing his formal education and graduating the 8<sup>th</sup> grade – he scored at the 12.6 grade level. Not exactly backwards in math and language either.

## **6. The Value of Hard Work – Genesis 2:15**

Many Americans work hard, yet see work as a burden or necessary evil to finish so that we can enjoy the “rest of life”. Interestingly, God gave man work before the fall. Work is not a punishment for our sin, but a gift from God. We know from Scripture that there will be work to be done in heaven. This work will not involve hardship or discomfort anymore, but will be done without strife.

Many know that the Mennonites and Amish are hard-workers, but it is more than that. Work is a part of their identity, it is part of their ministry to care for the Earth that God has entrusted to them. Work is seen as using your God-given abilities to care and tend and build for His glory. These people know that God owns all and entrusts part of it to their care. Psalm 50:10 tells us that “the Lord owns the cattle on the thousand hills”. It is merely their job to take good care of God’s herd and God’s land. While they are hard workers, they rarely let profit and accumulation of material wealth become the focus of their work. They understand what it means when Proverbs 3:9 says “Honor the Lord with your wealth; with the first fruits of all your crops” and Matthew 6:24 says “You cannot serve both God and money.”

## **7. The Value of the Sabbath – Exodus 20:8**

While they are hard workers and place value on accomplishment, the Mennonites and Amish also place a great value on the Sabbath and taking a break. The Sabbath day is indeed holy and work stops. You can recognize the Amish or Mennonite businesses when traveling the Fingerlakes Region because the sign almost always reads “No Sunday Sales”. The Sabbath is reserved for worship and for spending time with family and friends. Recreation among various groups of the Amish and Mennonites may include baseball, hockey, reading, playing board games, travelling, visiting historical locals or even Disney World.

## **8. The Value of Church over Government – Romans 13:1**

The “plain people” do pay taxes. They pay property, income, school taxes, sales taxes, etc. They rarely (if ever) receive any direct government support in return. They do not accept farm program payments or subsidies, they do not go on food stamps or welfare. They do not draw social security (this is the one tax which they are exempt from paying). The Old Order Amish and Mennonites do not vote either. They are politically non-involved. Often it seems that conservative Christians look to the government to end the social and moral evils of society such as pornography, abortion, or homosexual marriage. Alternatively, liberals tend to look to government to solve the problems of injustice and poverty. The Amish and Mennonites realize that only God can change men’s hearts and souls and look to Him alone as the redeemer of society and restorer of morality and justice.

## **9. The Value of Missions – Matthew 25:40 & 45**

The Amish and Mennonites are very mission oriented in that they seek to alleviate the suffering of others and provide for the less fortunate. Recently a huge benefit auction of donated merchandise was held in Pen Yann to raise money for missions in Haiti. 100% of the proceeds of everything from donated quilts to food to 2-car garages were donated to missions. The Amish and Mennonites have been very active in Haiti long before it became the “trendy” charitable cause since the earthquake. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 & 20 is lived out by the Eastern Mennonite group when they go to rest homes every other week to perform song services. They also go to other shut-ins to spread the gospel and bring joy through Biblical song. Because of outreach and evangelism, the majority of Mennonites are not white nor do they live in America. Guatemala, Ethiopia, and India are among the 60 or so countries around the world that all have thriving Mennonite congregations. Within this country about 1 of every 25 or 30 families in the conservative Eastern PA Mennonite Church is a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Mennonite family. They are not all Mennonites by heritage.

### **10. The Value of Biblical Christianity – John 14:6 and 2 Timothy 3:16**

The conservative Brethren have held to Biblical truth while many churches have watered-down their doctrine to seem more inclusive and less offensive to our post-modern society. Amish and Mennonites understand and hold to the fact that Jesus is the one and only hope for mankind. He alone is the source of salvation from our sins. God’s infallible Word is the ultimate truth and tool for training righteous living.

Through generations of persecution and hardship, the plain Amish and Mennonite people have held onto values that have been lost by the majority of society. We would do well to take notice that it is their commitment to the Bible and adherence to its teachings that is the source of their joy, contentment, and success through the years. We too can experience the same results when we apply Biblical wisdom and values to our lives. Amen.

I have several books, maps and other literature that I will have out in the fellowship hall for you all to look through. If anyone has other questions, I’m happy to answer them as best I am able after the service.