

What does the Amish Church Teach about Salvation?

1. Introduction

1) Sources

- a. John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, fourth edition (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

This is the most helpful book I have read so far. Hostetler grew up Amish and so has a personal knowledge of their beliefs and way of life. His sociological analysis does come through but that does not take away from the value of this book.

- b. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, revised edition (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Kraybill's work is helpful and a good complement to Hostetler, but his sociological analysis sometimes goes too far in my opinion. Nonetheless, to get as full and accurate a picture of the Amish as possible, you need to read both Hostetler and Kraybill.

- c. Stephen M. Nolt, *A History of the Amish*, revised edition (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

This is *the* standard for Amish history.

2. General History of the Amish

1) Anabaptism

a. History

- (1) Protestant Reformers Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin believed in the uniting of church and state and infant baptism
- (2) A group sought to “reform the reformers,” particularly in regard to these two areas. They became known as *Anabaptists*, meaning “rebaptizer.” They had been baptized as infants in the Catholic church.
- (3) Important Anabaptists are Conrad Grebel, Thomas Munzer, Balthasar Hubmaier, Jacob Hutter, Jan Mattys, Jan Bockelson, Felix Manz, Michael Sattler, George Blaurock, Menno Simons, and Dirk Phillips. Simons’ *Complete Works* and Phillips’ *Enchiridion* are today still read by both Amish and Mennonites.
- (4) Anabaptists were denounced and persecuted for over two centuries, not only by Roman Catholics but by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, with tens of thousands put to death.

- (5) As they fled persecution they became farmers, living separate from others unto themselves

b. Characteristics

- (1) Adult baptism
- (2) Church as a covenant community
- (3) Exclusion of unrepentant members from communion
- (4) Non-resistance, rejection of violence
- (5) Refusal to swear oaths
- (6) Separate socially from the world

c. Anabaptist groups that exist today

- (1) Mennonites
- (2) Hutterian Brethren (Hutterites)
- (3) Amish

2) Important Documents

- a. The Schleitheim Articles (1527)
- b. The Dordrecht Confession (1632)

3) Jacob Ammann

- a. Not much known about him
- b. Was a farmer-tradesman, probably a tailor
- c. Was an elder in Alsace, Switzerland
- d. The founder of the Amish wing of Anabaptism

4) The Break

Ammann disagreed with some other Swiss elders about the following issues:

- a. Observance of Communion – twice a year instead of once (greater discipline over members' lives instead of just once a year)
- b. Social Avoidance (*meidung*) – shunning, or the ban
- c. Foot Washing

Ammann ordered the other elders and churches to hold to his views; when they did not, he excommunicated them!

d. Later issues

- (1) Wearing traditional, simple clothing
- (2) No trimming of the beard
- (3) No wearing fashionable clothing

There are no Ammanns among the Amish today. As well, “the Amish people today regard themselves as Anabaptist, or *Wiedertäfer*, and most know nothing of Ammann. Through Ammann’s influence, however, they added foot washing, simple grooming styles, and social avoidance to the earlier basic Swiss tradition of brotherly love and brotherly union embodied in the Schleithem Articles” (Hostetler, 47).

- e. The Amish migrated to America primarily during two periods, 1727-1770 and 1815-1860. They primarily migrated to escape oppression in Europe. There are no Amish in Europe today; they are found only in North America.

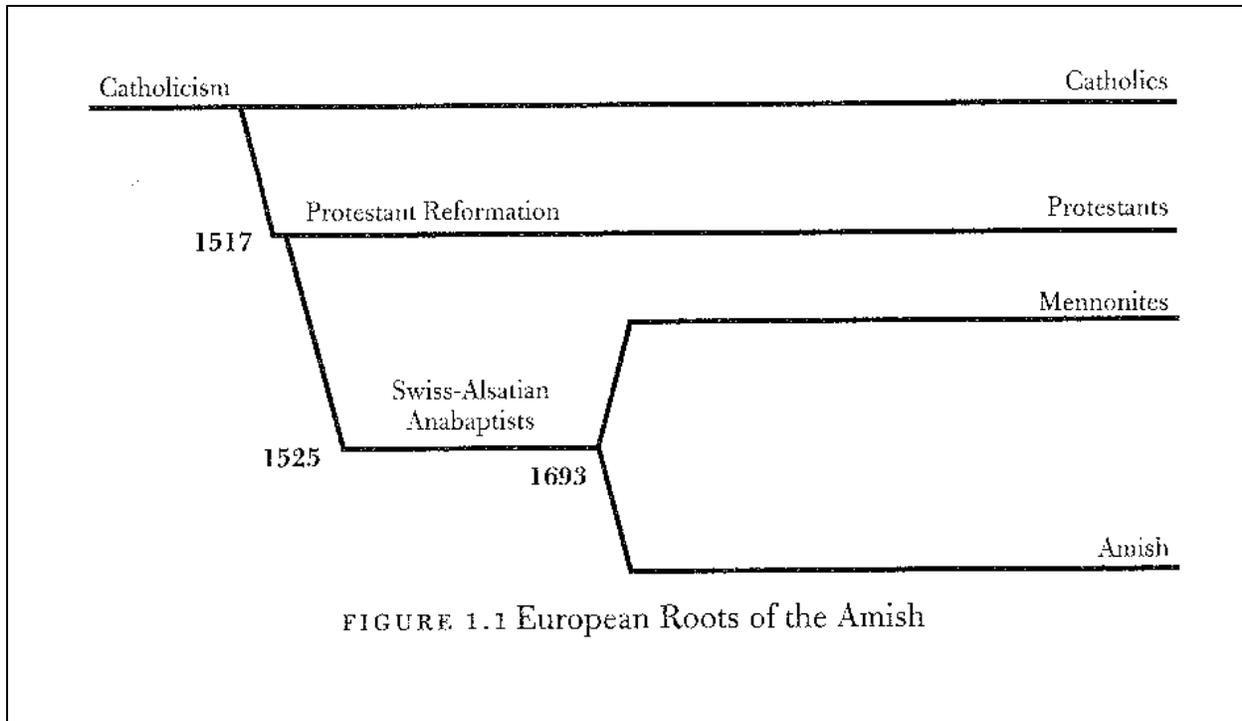


FIGURE 1.1 European Roots of the Amish

(Kraybill, p. 3)

3. What are the Basic Beliefs and Traditions of the Amish?

It is important that we understand *from the Amish standpoint* what *they* believe and how *they* view themselves. What are their fundamental values? What do they see as their end or goal? (I am indebted to Hostetler, pp. 74-90 for this.)

These fundamental beliefs keep Amish life and society together:

1) The **Church** Community

- a. The Amish view and understand themselves as the church. Every aspect of their life is look at from that perspective.
- b. The church is made up only of those who believe in the Amish way and are baptized

- c. The church is to be separate, completely different from the world
- d. The church is to pursue, promote, and preserve purity among its members
- e. Amish do not view salvation from the perspective of the *individual* but from the perspective of the *community*. Their lives do not aim for **personal** salvation but the building of their **community**.

2) **Separation** from the World

- a. Amish are to be separate from the desires, intent, and goals of worldly people

“If you’re not Amish, you’re English and part of the world” (Amish leader quoted in Kraybill, 44).
- b. The two most frequently quoted passages among the Amish sum up the message of the Bible from their perspective—

Rom 12:2 “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

2 Cor 6:14 “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?”

- c. Separation is applied to all social contacts outside their community. To fail to be separate from non-Amish would result in destroying their community, which is their aim and purpose.
- d. Separation from the world controls and colors their entire view of life
- e. This is the basis for not taking part in violence, war, self-defense, defending their possessions, bearing arms, taking oaths, or holding public office

3) The Vow of **Baptism**

- a. Baptism signifies—
 - (1) Repentance
 - (2) Total commitment to the church-community
 - (3) Becoming an adult
- b. One can only be baptized by choosing to receive the necessary preparatory instruction. This instruction...
 - (1) Is based on the Dordrecht Confession of Faith
 - (2) Teaching on a right relationship with God and right attitude toward the community

- c. At baptism the individual says, “It is my desire to be at peace with God and the Church” (Hostetler, 214). He is then asked three questions:
- (1) “Can you renounce the devil, the world, and your own flesh and blood?”
 - (2) “Can you commit yourself to Christ and His church, and to abide by it and therein to live and die?”
 - (3) “And in all the order (*Ordnung*) of the church, according to the word of the Lord, to be obedient and submissive to it and to help therein?” (Kraybill, 119)

After baptism the bishop says, “May the Lord God, complete the good work which he has begun in you and strengthen and comfort you to a blessed end through Jesus Christ. Amen” (Kraybill, 119).

- d. At baptism the Amish make a vow to unquestioningly accept the church’s values and to believe in their religion and way of life “entirely for their own sake”
- e. Parents generally do not have to pressure their children to do this as it is considered the normal and expected thing to do
- f. One cannot be married unless he is baptized
- g. While the actual *baptism* may not be significantly different from other “Christian” groups, the primary difference is *the intention* to maintain the “rules and order” (*Regel und Ordnung*) until death. One bishop said,

“It seems to me that every person should stay in church where he is baptized. He should never leave *that group* if he once makes a vow” (emphasis added; Hostetler 82)

4) *Ordnung* and **Tradition**

- a. The *Ordnung* (they pronounce it *Ott-ning*) are the regulations that order every aspect of Amish life, the code of conduct of the way things are supposed to be because God intended it that way. This creates a culture that is different from the world.
- b. All Amish know the *Ordnung* and is not usually written down.
- c. The *Ordnung*...
- (1) Makes clear what is worldly and sinful
 - (2) Is sometimes supported from Scripture, often not
 - (3) Regulations without Scriptural support are to be obeyed because to do otherwise would be worldly
 - (4) “The old way is the better way”
 - (5) Is agreed upon by the church twice a year, before communion
 - (6) Restricts self-expression for the betterment of the community
 - (7) Results in order, tidiness, and unity among all—no personal pride and distinctions are seen

- d. Examples of practices **ordered** by the *Ordnung*:
 - (1) Color and style of clothing
 - (2) Hat styles for men
 - (3) Order of the worship service
 - (4) Use of horses for fieldwork
 - (5) Steel wheels on machinery

- e. Examples of practices **prohibited** by the *Ordnung*:
 - (1) Air transportation
 - (2) Central heating in homes
 - (3) Electricity from public power lines
 - (4) Jewelry (including wedding rings and wrist watches)
 - (5) Owning computers, televisions, radios
 - (6) Owning and operating an automobile
 - (7) Wall-to-wall carpeting
 - (8) Using tractors for fieldwork

- f. Traditions are sacred and essential to the Amish way of life. It is part of their religion to uphold and adhere to the traditions passed down to them from their forefathers, even though they may not have reasons for the tradition.

5) Excommunication and Social Avoidance (**Shunning**)

- a. Contemporary Amish practice of shunning is as Jacob Ammann taught

- b. Church members that are wicked and rebellious are to be excluded. There are three classes of persons who must be excluded
 - (1) Those who live in open sin
 - (2) Those who cause divisions
 - (3) Those who teach a false doctrine

- c. Excommunication is called the *Bann*, and social avoidance is called *Meidung* or shunning

- d. Shunning involves separation from family, friends, and neighbors. Everything they have known, loved, and depended on is now off limits to them.

- e. During shunning conversation can be maintained but there can be no handshaking or reception of help from the offender. Members can help offenders, but not vice versa.

- f. One under the *Bann* can be restored to the church depending on the nature of their offense.

- g. This is the means by which Amish life is perpetuated and maintained. Only those who break their vow at baptism are shunned.

All the things involved in living “the Amish way” are viewed as essential to the process of salvation. For the Amish, salvation is found *in their* culture and community, not *outside* it.

While the Amish church teaches the new birth (regeneration, born again), it is completely different from our understanding. Though they use the same biblical texts, they have an entirely different interpretation. The new birth is not viewed in terms of individual experience and freedom from the power and penalty of sin but submission to the church community.

To stress individual needs, experience, opinions, and views threatens the unity of the church.

4. How Does All This Work Out?

“Amish religion tends to be ritualistic and non-theological. Christianity is to be lived and not talked about” (Hostetler, 182). Philippians 2:12 is a favorite quotation—“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”

“The old way of life” (*das alt Gebrauch*) sums up separation from the world, the rules and discipline (*Ordnung*) of the church, and their position as strangers and pilgrims in the world.

As the Amish do not see salvation in terms of the individual but his/her life in and through the community, what does “working out your salvation” look like?

1) Childhood

- a. Children are considered sinless as they do not know the difference between right and wrong. Though they have inherited a sin nature, it is not their fault; they are not born sinners.
- b. It is the duty of the parents to teach children what is right and wrong. Through this teaching the child sees he needs the church. The child is encouraged and taught to see that they need to choose the “right way” of the Amish church.
- c. Children see and are taught that every aspect of their lives is to be lived differently from non-Amish (called *English* or *Yankees*)
- d. The result of this careful upbringing is that children only feel comfortable among the Amish
- e. Before a child can join the church he must be raised and taught their “way of life”

2) Young Adulthood to Baptism

- a. Around the age of sixteen Amish teens enter a period known as *rumspringa* (“running around”), a time when they *can* rebel or “sow wild oats.”

- b. During this period the young person struggles to learn what it means to be Amish. They are neither in nor out of the church—they must work through whether they will join the church or not.
- c. The Amish see this time as a good thing, for when an Amish young person decides to be baptized and join the church it is because he has decided to do so—he is not forced to this decision.
- d. Young adults are urged to join the church

Funerals are times when church leaders especially urge young people to join the church. “Death is the result of Adam’s sin. Young people, when you are old enough to think about joining the church, don’t put it off” (Hostetler, 204). **Note how sin is dealt with—through joining the church.**

- e. If an Amish person does not join the church he is not shunned because he was not baptized and therefore did not promise to obey the *Ordnung*.
- f. Baptism is seen as the climax of life—before them lies romance, land, family, and community, and these things pull the Amish young person toward baptism (Kraybill, 117).

3) Adulthood

- a. Obedience to the *Ordnung*
- b. Marriage and family are the expected norms
- c. Caring for and serving one another

5. Summary

- 1) Amish view salvation differently than other Christians:
 - a. One cannot know now if one is saved; that is pride. One will only know at the last judgment.
 - b. The commands of obedience and self-denial are emphasized more than salvation by faith alone through grace alone
 - c. Christ is one who “shows the way,” how to live, not merely one who atones for sin
 - d. The hope of salvation is found in obeying the church and striving for harmony through church order
 - e. “Thus an Amish person puts his faith in God, obeys the order of the church, and patiently hopes for the best” (Hostetler, 77)
- 2) The goal of eternal life is sought by conforming to a **lifestyle**. Salvation is defined “as obedience to the community.”

“Many Mennonites who are descendants of the Anabaptists have shifted from Anabaptism toward Protestantism, with its emphasis on individual salvation *as epitomized in the writings of the Apostle Paul*” (emphasis added; Hostetler, 393).

“Two cornerstones of Amish religious doctrine are *obedience* to the church’s teachings and *separation* from the world. **Only members who are obedient to the church and separate from the world will receive God’s blessing of peace and eternal life.** These cardinal beliefs funnel individual energy toward the shared goal of preserving a disciplined and distinctive community” (Kraybill, 22).

- 3) **Discipleship** is a commitment to love the Amish community.
- 4) Amish do believe in the basic doctrines of Christianity, but they emphasize **practice** more than doctrine (Kraybill, 28).
- 5) “Salvation” is not to be viewed from an **individual** perspective but from a cultural perspective, namely, the Amish culture.
- 6) Salvation is viewed as a **process**, not an “event.”

6. Evaluation

It can be tempting to shy away from evaluating Amish beliefs. This is probably due to a number of factors, primarily our fascination with and even admiration of them. “How could *we* judge *them*?” However, a few things must be kept in mind:

- ✓ Jesus said that there is only one way to salvation and eternal life; there cannot be two or more different ways. The Amish consciously advocate a different way.
 - ✓ The Bible commands us, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). While we must judge/evaluate ourselves by the same standard, this does not free us of this responsibility.
- 1) The NT says that one is saved by faith not by works (Rom 3:28). It is not obedience (faith) to the community but to Christ (John 3:36)
 - 2) Finding salvation in Christ alone is replaced with finding salvation in the church (Acts 13:39; Rom 3:28; 4:5; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9)
 - 3) The NT clearly calls for *individual* repentance and faith, not for maintaining a specific culture or way of life (Acts 16:30-31; 17:30; Rom 10:9-10, etc)
 - 4) The NT *does* teach and prescribe a way of life, but it is the result of the new birth, a distinctly individual experience (Eph 4:17-24).
 - 5) The NT explicitly denigrates reliance upon “keeping the rules,” evaluating such as “rubbish” or “dung” (Phil 3:7-11). Relying on one’s identity, culture, family, attitude, and works actually

work against one's salvation than for it. Instead, there must be complete reliance on Christ's righteousness through faith rather than one's own.

- 6) The prerequisite for baptism and church membership is conversion, not compliance (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 2:41-42).

One is not baptized and join the church *to be* at peace with God but *because* he is at peace with God. The things that motivate Amish to be baptized—marriage, land, family, and community—are not NT reasons for baptism.

- 7) There *is* biblical precedent and command for regulating *every aspect* of life and discipline for infraction, but it is found in the OT, when individuals were under the Law. Christians are not under the Law but under grace (Rom 6:14; 7:4, 6; Gal 2:19; 5:18).
- 8) Maintaining good order, morals, and appearance are not equivalent to salvation (Rom 10:9-10). This applies not only to Amish but also to any religious group that has some similarities to Christianity, including ours.

External appearances do not tell the whole—even correct—story. The appearance of a well-ordered, seemingly content and happy family walking to church on Sunday morning does not mean they have new life in Christ.

- 9) As Christians we *are* to be separate from the world “in our thoughts, desires, appearance, and activities, guarding ourselves against those things that are sinful, could tempt us to sin, or that do not promote or are not consistent with holiness” (Orwell Bible Church covenant). The command to not be conformed to this world (Rom 12:2) is based on one's right standing with God which comes only through personal faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 12:1).
- 10) The Gospels bear testimony to the fact that while “tithing mint and cumin” is essential it is not everything (Matt 23:23), and that one can be clean from an external viewpoint but be “whitewashed tombs” (Matt 23:27).
- 11) Most of the prescriptions of the *Ordnung* are not biblical grounds for excommunication (“teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” Matt 15:9)
- 12) To ignore or change Christ's command to preach the gospel is wrong (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).
- 13) Ironically, the Amish hold to a form of universalism by believing that they have a hope eternal life if they stay Amish but also believing that others are saved through their church.