

POINTS THAT STIMULATE CONTINUITY  
FOR THE AMISH AND THEIR SISTER GROUPS  
TO MAINTAIN THEIR DISTINCTIVE ORDER

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1. The Source

This material is compiled from -

- interviews and associations with various Amish and Mennonite ministers and lay people;
- writings, statements of faith, and periodicals of our people;
- letters of personal correspondence in which desires and convictions have been expressed;
- my own observations and experiences in being born and raised in an Amish minister's home as well as being a member in the Beachy Amish fellowship with ministerial responsibilities for the last fourteen years.

I do not speak from the standpoint of an "out-sider" who has made a scientific study of a group which was formerly unknown to him. Instead I offer these remarks as one who has been and still is a vital part of the groups being represented. I am a member of these groups partly because of my heritage and birthright, but most of all, because I am thoroughly persuaded that this way of life is the best expression I have seen of the Biblical principles of love (both to one another as brethren and to all men), separation unto the holy God in attitude, nonconformity with a dying world in practice, and simplicity of desires in daily living and experiences.

2. Identifying Amish and Sister Groups

The Amish are a part of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement. There are about twenty different branches of Mennonites with varying degrees of separation distinctives. There are the ultra-conservative groups that are readily obvious at a glance and there are others who refer to their distinc-

tives as being only the belief in a "nonresistant love" which is not readily obvious.

There are, also, those groups where both sexes bear the distinctive marks of separation and some groups where only the women can be seen bearing these distinctive marks. We are basically talking about such groups where the whole family unit gives visible expression to some degree of separation.

Such a categorization would include the OLD ORDER AMISH, the NEW ORDER AMISH, the BEACHY AMISH, and some of the CONSERVATIVE MENNONITE groups.

### 3. The Distinctives

When we speak of distinctives, we speak of an accepted order or rule that has been either a long-established religious or social practice or that which is agreed upon by the formulating individuals which sets them apart from modern society.

They include such areas as: Dress, Technology, Transportation, Behavior, Social Life, Doctrine, Education, Occupation, etc. These distinctives vary from one group to another but they are easily recognized by the groups themselves and by "out-siders."

The dress or appearance is probably the most obvious to an "out-sider" without noticing very many variations in the different groups. One that is a part of a group readily recognizes the differences and, thus, identifies the person with his particular group.

An example of this would be the woman's head covering. All of these groups wear a head covering in obedience to I Corinthians 11 (in the Bible) as a symbol of the woman's

submission to man. This covering varies in size, pattern, material, and design without distracting from the "headship" principle. Though somewhat different, they are all readily recognizable as representing the same principle.

Much more could be pointed out in connection with variations of the distinctives, but that is not our point in focus. We simply mention it for you to understand that we are not talking about only one particular group but related groups with the same or similar backgrounds who hold similar positions on different levels or degrees of distinctiveness and have been able to maintain them in a changing and shifting society. Our aim is to point out the dynamics or principles in operation in these groups that have made this possible.

Another thing that needs to be mentioned is that some of the groups under consideration are much older in their origin than others. Also, it should be noted that there are varying degrees of success in maintaining said order. The OLD ORDER AMISH date back to the 1690s; whereas, the BEACHY AMISH were established in this the twentieth century. All the other groups (with the exception of a few) have had their origin in the Old Order Amish and have, therefore, maintained the name and adhered largely to the same principles.

#### 4. The Dynamics

##### 4.1 Religious Culturality

Many of the customs and traditions are of historical European origin - - - but they are MORE than that. The Amish, who have a strong belief in God and the Bible and who seek to apply its teaching to every-day practical life, did not go along with the deterioration of general society, but maintained for themselves a church-oriented code or rule. Over the years this has developed into an accepted religious culture, and it becomes quite serious when one of the members

(or one of their children) choose another (worldly) way. For them the current styles and fashions are the way of the world and the world is under the judgment of God. Therefore, they want no part with such a system!

Many of these groups are quite exclusive in their acceptance of other "Christian" confessions. Many from the "outside" do not get that impression simply because it is not verbalized. They choose to live their faith rather than speak it. These groups do not believe that they are the ONLY true ones. They believe, however, like Jesus said: "few there be that find it" and they hope to be among the few.

One must understand that this order is not self-imposed. It is not up to the individual to regulate as he or she thinks it should be. It is not the "master-mind" of some religious fanatic who is trying to govern his subjects at his own will. It is the long-time proven order by this Christian society and, therefore, becomes for them their religious culture.

This order is, also, to be considered of a religious nature - because it is Bible-oriented. For many of the details, you would not find a "THUS SAITH THE LORD," but instead you will find a broad treatment of Scriptural principles such as unity, simplicity, modesty, and hard work - "in the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread."

Some of the order may seem more complex than simple. When one walks into a workshop and observes all the pulleys, shafts, and belts in connection with the alterations of some modern machines to fit such ancient set-ups, one would think it much more simple to install an electric motor which would do the same work with less noise and even be more economical. Nevertheless, to have an electric motor would mean the installation of electricity which would open the way (or provide the temptation) for many more gadgets which would mili-

tate against their concept of life and, therefore, they choose to do without.

This order is a part of an Amishman's religious commitment, yet most of them would not have a theological explanation for many of the practices. Usually not much effort is put forth to explain their position to an outsider because they would anticipate being misunderstood. If they are pressed for an answer, they will likely give some practical reason than a theological one. An example: One farmer was asked why he does not implement a tractor instead of horses. After much hesitation he remarked: "A tractor does not make manure." His answer was a very logical one according to economical standards. The tractor will consume the earth's resources and pollute the environment; whereas, a horse will actually replenish the soil so highly favored by these "people of the land."

#### 4.2 The Fear of God Concept

Fear - as used - does not mean "to be afraid of" but rather "to reverence." It is illustrated in some of the recorded prayers in statements like - "Thou great God and Father" , "Thou Creator of heaven and earth and all that is therein" , and "Thou that rulest in the kingdom of men."

This fear is realized in the emphasis of humility - "God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble." This emphasis is applied to all of life's experiences. It is emphasized in dress and personal appearance. Dress is a church-regulated and controlled pattern or form with common uniformity and, therefore, gives little occasion for individuals to show status or rank.

Cleanliness and tidiness are a vital part of our people's make-up. There is a warning against spending too much time in front of the mirror in admiration of one's person. Mirrors

are, therefore, not plentiful and of minimal dimensions in our homes. Artificial make-up, hair-dos, and other ornamental decorations with jewelry are considered a form of pride and are not permitted.

The highest aspiration of being a Christian among our people is not to be a minister or a leader, but simply to be a good and faithful church member. Anyone even indicating his desire for such responsibility is marked as one having the "preacher's itch" which would disqualify him for said position.

#### 4.3 Choosing and Role of Leadership

The leadership consists of a BISHOP, MINISTERS, and a DEACON. These are not trained men, but capable laymen chosen and ordained by the brotherhood to serve in these capacities. The ministers and deacons are chosen directly from among the laity. The bishops are chosen out of the ministers and deacons.

The choice is made when the ministers retire to a private room and each of the members appear separately to give the name of the one whom they feel the Lord would have serve in this capacity. The ministers carefully receive and record the votes from the congregation. A predetermined amount of votes is required to qualify one to draw a "lot." This number varies anywhere from two to ten, sometimes more. When there is more than one with or exceeding the required amount of votes (which is often the case), the names of these men are announced to the congregation. These men, then, come before the congregation.

The same amount of identical song books (as there are men) are placed on a table or bench in front of these men (with the "lot" in one of these books). These books are, then, shuffled so that only God knows in which book the "lot"

is found. After much prayer (and often a lot of hesitation), each man takes the book of his choice. The officiating bishop then opens the books one by one and the brother in whose book the "lot" is found is the one that is ordained. He is asked to stand and answer some questions in the affirmative (committing himself to this service) after which he kneels to receive the ordination charge. This choice is not questioned by anyone in the community because everyone realizes that the finalization was not of man - but of God!

The ordained men or ministerial body serve as executives or officials in the ecclesiastical as well as the community affairs. The bishop is the officiating party. They are, also, responsible to exercise discipline and maintain the order of the church. They, however, do not rule or dictate to the church. Any decision is undertaken only by the unanimous voice of the church. The church is not run as a democracy but the leaders prepare a proposal to present to the body who in turn give their agreement or disagreement. If a voice is negative, there needs to be a legitimate reason. This makes for unity and strength.

#### 4.4 Group Concept

Baptism and church membership is undertaken by personal choice ONLY - on the confession of one's faith and the evidence of a New Birth. This is evidenced not only in a vertical relation with God, but also in a covenantal commitment to the brotherhood community.

It is a serious violation for an individual to violate the accepted rules or order. Various degrees of discipline are administered for offenses with the ultimate sense being that of "excommunication" - or expulsion, after which one is shunned. To be shunned means to be excluded from the religious rites of the sacred as well as exclusion from social and material affairs. This discipline is not administered

out of revenge or hatred, but in an effort to win the person back, to manifest love, and to maintain the sanctity of the group.

This commitment is, also, experienced in that "When one member suffers, all suffer with it." When adversity or disaster strikes one of the members or families, great efforts of sympathy and helpfulness are exercised toward them. Many other activities such as quilting, butchering, and harvesting are done collectively. Caring for the aged is done through personal thrift and savings and the extended family, so that insurance becomes unnecessary.

#### 4.5 Occupations Must Honor God

For our people a "Gottesdienst" is not merely a service where one comes together to worship. God is experienced in work as well as in worship. Occupations are chosen that serve the basic needs of man (food, clothing, shelter, transportation, education, etc.). Such occupations and endeavors that are destructive to health and morality are avoided. Farming and craftsmanship are the predominant occupations. Occupations that afford community and togetherness are emphasized.

Professionalism tends to draw people into urban settings and is, therefore, discouraged. It is not strictly forbidden if a strong tie with the home community is maintained.

#### 4.6 Family Emphasis

The average size (7+) of the family denotes the degree of emphasis on its value. The emphasis though is not so much on quantity as it is on quality. The question is often raised why our people refuse some of the modern technology. The answer is simply that modern technology would introduce a totally different life-style and pace.



Much of today's modern machinery tends to make one independent and destroys the responsibility and helpfulness to the brothers in the community. It also minimizes the demand for the labor force from within the family itself. It also decreases the efficiency in production which demands more labor outside the home.

Things like radio and television open the door to outside influences rather than the orientation and instructions of the parents and the church. It also centers the attention of the family on entertainment rather than on establishing strong relationships in conversation and play. Too, it demoralizes one's character and introduces patriotism and militarism, which militates against one of our strong beliefs.

Children are taught at a very young age to take responsibility in managable duties and chores. This does not mean that they are being exploited, because they also have much time to play and be creative in their own way. It is the child's delight to follow the daily work of it's parents. It builds within them the feeling of usefulness and internal self-worth, which readily makes their highest aspiration to be like its parents. These children are some of the happiest in the world.

Discipline, order, and respect are a vital part of the child's training. Obedience is imperative for the continuity of this - or any other - society.

Children play a vital role in worship, also. A child is taken to church for the first time at about two weeks old. Sunday church attendance is the experience of the whole family. The sermons are not some high sounding, theological orations, but simple and practical expositions so that even a child will be able to follow the thoughts. With this inclusiveness, it is no wonder that approximately eighty

per cent of the off-spring choose the life and faith of their parents.

#### 4.7 Language

Even the language is associated with the "two-world" concept. Most of our groups are bi-lingual. The Pennsylvania "Deutsch" is the language of the home, church, and community; while English is used for business. The emphasis varies, but English is often associated with the world. This is illustrated in a letter to me from my aunt, who writes about a baby in their particular family who died of a "crib-death." It was very hard on the family, but she remarked that it is probably better this way because she might have grown up and gone "English."

I find that those individuals and groups that are embarrassed about their Pennsylvania "Deutsch" will also soon find themselves integrated into modern society.

#### 4.8 Education

Quality education is a vital part of our children's development. Much value is placed on parochial or church schools. Many of the teachers are uncertified. They are volunteers who take a great interest in the children as well as in teaching. Influence has a great effect in setting the course of life, and so we find it necessary to have the children under the constant influence of our own people. Quality to us does not only mean academic but practical and for most of the occupations chosen by our people, an elementary education is sufficient.

#### 5. In Conclusion

My presentation, also, has a practical and realistic thrust. It is for the continuity of our society. I do not

contribute to stimulate intellectual ego, but rather to better help my people and to offer rest, peace, and security in a constant and consistent way to those who are looking for a meaningful life-style alternative.

