

## FORGIVENESS AND THE AMISH SCHOOL MURDERS

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Matt. 18-21-22; Luke 23:34; Matt 6:12

### Introduction:

In the Protestant calendar the last Sunday of the month of October is called Reformation Sunday, because Martin Luther posted his "95 Theses" on October 31st, Halloween and the Eve of All Saints Day." This document is considered by most church historians as the beginning of the Reformation, which is in my mind the second most important event in Christianity outside the life and ministry of Jesus and the establishment of the early church. I intend to preach on the Reformation on October 28th but I also during the next two Sundays speak on two different groups, which are rooted in the Reformation.

Next Sunday, following the annual gathering of the ABCRM in Cheyenne this coming weekend, I will preach on the topic "Is Being Baptist Relevant in the 21st Century?" The Baptists did not begin in the Reformation, but they arose out of two groups who did - the Reformed tradition that it expressed itself in English Puritanism and English Separatism, and the Anabaptist movement, which produced the Mennonites who in some ways influenced the early Baptists.

Today, I am going to speak on a movement that arose out of the Mennonite tradition and I will fill in a few blanks historically to provide the foundation. So, let me begin with a question.

Does God ever speak to you - really? God has spoken to me. I know, when you hear someone say that your head for cover. It's like when I hear a tv evangelist say that "I need to hear from you today," I grab my wallet and hang on. But I say to you today that God not too long ago spoke not only to me, but possibly to everyone of us, if we will listen.

Let me say a few words about how I see things in this regard. I look for some kind of affirmation, some "sign" if you please. In the early days of the church, they witnessed to the testimony of the Spirit in some manner, especially when they were launching out in new directions. I have struggled with this idea for many years. How can we see and sense God in our lives without going over to some kind of unusual manifestation?

As a student and then a teacher of the history of Christianity I studied and taught about 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism. One of the appealing aspects of the liberal message was the immanence of God, or God with us. I liked that and often taught that we need to look for the working of God in our midst. But what do we look for? Miracles, healings, glossalalia, speaking in unknown tongues? This has always been a challenge.

A few years ago (2006) in early October I saw the presence of God, and I saw it in one of the great tragedies and ironies of our time. I saw God speaking to us in the murder of five young Amish children in a one-room school in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Before discussing this event, let me tell you a little bit about the Amish and their beginnings.

I. Who are the Amish? Well they are a very interesting group of people, who seem so out of place and out of step in the 21st century. The Amish resulted from a division within a group called the Mennonites. The Mennonites are products of the Protestant Reformation, which began in the sixteenth century when Martin Luther posted his famous "95 Theses" on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony on October 31, 1517.

The Mennonites were a part of the Reformation which is called the Radical Reformation. They were quite different from the mainstream movements like Lutheranism, Calvinism and the Reformed Tradition, and the English Reformation. All of these believed in a state church and in varying degrees would battle with and punish those with whom they disagreed.

The Radical Reformation opposed a state church and were a part of the free church movement. They held to the authority of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament. Many adopted believer's baptism. They usually held to some form of congregational polity. They practiced a very warm fellowship. And in most but not all cases they were pacifists and opposed Christians holding public office. In a lot of ways, they held to many of the beliefs and practices of the Baptists who appeared a little later on the scene.

The Mennonites were followers of Menno Simons, who was born in 1494 and raised in a peasant family. He was ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in 1524. He began to seriously study the Scriptures in 1526 or 1527. He began to question infant baptism and came into contact with some Anabaptists, or "re-baptizers."

The martyrdom of a brother, Pieter, in 1535 contributed to his rejection of the Roman Church in 1536. He became the leader of a group of Dutch Anabaptists, and the movement took the name "Mennonites" or "Mennists." It continues on today.

To show a spiritual kinship with Baptists, the Mennonites experienced a split led by Jakob Amman. In 1693 he led a group away from the Mennonites over the lack of discipline in terms of the "ban." The ban was the practice related to those who had been baptized and then left the church. The followers of Amman wanted no contact with them. They became known as the Amish and are the ones that we see today who continue a very conservative faith and an avoidance of modern life. They dress in black, drive horses and buggies, and basically identify with a 19<sup>th</sup> century culture. Many do not refer to themselves as Mennonites. The Amish consistently have banned contact with the evils and the conveniences of the modern world.

The regular Mennonites, while still practicing a conservative religion, are more open to the modern world. Their dress is consistent with conservative dress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and they blend in well with the rest of us.

A few stories: Between 1874 and 1884, 5,000 Russian Mennonites settled in Kansas. They brought with them Turkey Red winter wheat. The story goes that the women sewed pouches in their petticoats and were able to "smuggle" the wheat out of Russia. The red wheats from the Russian Mennonites, along with other developments, led to the successful production of hard red winter wheat in the Great Plains. Although most of the early wheats are no longer grown for commercial production, most of the strains of hard red winter wheat grown on the Great Plains prior to 1969 were developed from those early ancestors, first brought to Kansas in 1872.

The Amish Mennonites have long been at the center of some important church and state cases related to compulsory attendance in the public schools. My favorite story in this regard comes from Iowa, where state law required students to attend the public schools up to a certain age, I think 16. The Amish would only send their children to the eighth grade, and then take them out of the schools. On one occasion a school superintendent and the county sheriff went to an Amish home with a court order to take the children to school. As they stepped up on the porch they saw the kids running over the hill out back. One of the two responded, "The hookies got way today but we will get them next time." Why did he call them "hookies?" The Amish do not use buttons on their clothing because it is "ornamentation." They use "hook-and-eyes." So when you cut school, the real foundation for playing "hookie" is not to go fishing but to be like the Amish who don't go to school.

The Amish also battled state governments over displaying the orange, fluorescent triangle on their buggies when driving on state highways.

II. Mennonite beliefs: Today, both the regular Mennonites and the Amish are basically a conservative people who believe in the authority of the Scriptures, New Testament, and genuinely practice their faith. Among their beliefs is the teaching of Jesus, when he says "Let your "yes" be "yes", and your "no" be "no." In other words, let your word be good. They express this in an admirable work ethic. They do what they say they will do.

They also continue to be pacifistic and oppose war. Some, however, have served their country in non-combat positions while still being conscientious objectors. They provide a model for peaceful relations with others.

Nothing is more evident in terms of their response to the murder of five of their children, and the critical wounding of two others. We all have heard the tragic report of how a milk truck driver, husband and father of three children, entered a one room school house and held about a dozen young girls hostage, how he tied them up at the ankles, placed them side-by-side and eventually shot some of them before taking his own life.

In a few days funerals were held for 13-year-old Marian Fisher, 7-year-old Naomi Rose Ebersol and sisters Mary Liz Miller, 8, Lena Miller, 7, and 12-year-old Anna Mae Stoltzfus.

The nation, even the world was outraged and stunned by these senseless killings. But the remarkable aspect to this story was the response of the Amish. Almost immediately, despite overwhelming grief, the community responded with a show of forgiveness for the murderer. Not one word of anger or hatred was put forth by these people of genuine faith. In fact, they were able to demonstrate unbelievable compassion for the killer's wife and three children. When empathetic people who wanted to show support for the Amish through contributions to a fund for the victims' family to help with mounting medical bills, the Amish leaders reached out and offered to provide a portion for the widow and the children of the one who had caused so much grief. One of the families invited the widow to the funeral of their daughter. I am certain that the purpose was healing, not revenge.

The Amish have been the voice of God to all of us in this at times pathetic world. They have demonstrated that God's offer and demand of forgiveness are not simply shallow words. They are truly practicing what they preach and doing so in a manner that calls attention not to themselves but to God and his love and forgiveness.

Application: I truly believe that God has spoken to us in these events. He has demonstrated through the faith of the Amish what it truly means to forgive. Jesus when asked by Peter if we should forgive seven times, He responded seventy times seven. He was not just giving a number. Seven is a number that symbolizes completion. Jesus was saying that we should keep on forgiving as long as it takes.

On the cross Jesus upon looking upon those who were executing him and those who were watching prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?" He did not pray for justice or revenge but rather for mercy.

When we recite the Lord's Prayer each Sunday we pray the words "And forgive us our debts, or trespasses in the KJV, as we forgive our debtors or those who trespass against us." Do we really mean these words, or are they simply a model to make us feel good for knowing the truth? We must live the truth.

I really believe that forgiveness is as much for the forgiver as for the one forgiven. It is healing. It is therapeutic. When we don't forgive, when we carry a grudge, when we are controlled by anger and hatred, we waste so much of the good that can come forth from our lives.

If the Amish can forgive a perverted, disturbed, cold-blooded killer, can we not forgive those with whom we have disagreements, quarrels, issues? And, can we not do it quickly like the Amish? Forgiveness is a way of life for them. And they have taught us magnificently during this tragedy.

Conclusion: In thinking about the events of this story, I have been called upon to recall my own journey. I see two strong parallels among many with the Amish. One is the call to let my word be good, let my "yes"

be “yes” and my “no” be “no.” I don’t always succeed at this but I do try. As a teacher I often reminded my students of this teaching when they tried to find excuses for not keeping their word. And I tried to remind myself that I had to set an example.

Concerning forgiveness, somewhere along the way I was taught and I do believe in forgiveness. It’s easy to find a rationale not to forgive. But harboring grudges, being angry, being unforgiving does not do one any good, and I truly believe that.

In the late 1970s I was teaching at a small, Baptist school, my alma mater, in the Missouri Ozarks. I was a young teacher and, before I knew it I was being attacked by a pastor of a small, fundamentalist Baptist church. His students attending our school were providing him with reports on my “heresies,” on a regular basis. Often they totally misunderstood what I was saying, but not always. In the end his efforts got me fired. I went on to Oklahoma Baptist University and had a good career and a good experience.

During my first year at OBU this pastor called me one morning before the sun came up. He recounted how he had left fundamentalism because it was so negative and how without knowing it, he had slipped back into the negative mode. He told me that he still disagreed with me on many things but that his attacks were wrong. He asked my forgiveness. I accepted. I had been taught to forgive and the teaching had “took.”

This pastor even asked if I would teach a session on Baptist history at his church, a major development that showed the genuineness of his change of heart. He also asked if there was anything he could do to help right the situation. I had already been fired and there was nothing that could be done there. But I asked him to send me the file he had on me. I was sure he had one. Within a week I received a manila envelope with almost 40 pages of copies of letters and telephone call transcripts that he had collected from his efforts. They provide most interesting reading and if any one ever writes a biography of my life, they will be good source material (that will not happen and my son will shred them probably).

I don’t harbor any ill will toward this man. In a sense his actions led to my going to another school and having a productive career. I got to do things I would never have done had I stayed in Missouri. And, the whole story reminds me today that forgiveness is a wonderful Christian virtue based not upon one being better than any one else but rather upon the example provided by God Himself.

Today, is there someone that you need to forgive? Call them, go visit them, heal the past and you will heal the future. Is there someone that you need to ask forgiveness? Don’t delay any longer. Enjoy the power of forgiveness. Maybe God who has spoken through the Amish to us will speak to someone else through you.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer this morning and other mornings, Jesus is teaching us that those who receive and rely upon God’s forgiveness are people who are expected to forgive others.

God has spoken to us through the Amish. His words are as clear as they were in the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord’s Prayer. Forgiveness is not only a better way. It is the only way.