

Why The Amish Fascinate Us

by Mark S. Joy

Modern Americans seem to have a deep fascination with the Amish. Tourism to the “Pennsylvania Dutch” settlements in Pennsylvania and Ohio has been very popular for several decades now. In more recent years, there has been a spate of Christian romance novels set in Amish culture, and these seem to sell very well in Christian book stores around the country. The tragic murder of five young Amish schoolchildren in 2006 also focused a great deal of attention on the Amish in Pennsylvania and their culture and religious beliefs. One of the most remarkable things that came out of that horrible incident was the forgiveness that the Amish people showed to the murderer (who had committed suicide) and to his surviving wife and children.¹

Part of the interest many have in the Amish no doubt stems from simple nostalgia or an antiquarian interest. People travel to see the Amish communities in part for the same reasons as we visit historic re-enactments at museums, or threshing shows where we see the old farming technology still in operation. We know that a few generations back, many of our ancestors lived with the kind of technology the Amish regularly use today, and that creates a natural interest. I love to go to the steam thresher’s reunion at new Rockford, north Dakota every fall, and to the Sodbuster’s Day at the historic farmstead on the Ft. Ransom State Park in the Sheyenne river Valley in southeastern North Dakota. For many people, their interest in the Amish is similar to these events — they represent a kind of “museum piece” of an old-fashioned way of living.

But for sincere Christians, I think the fascination with the Amish goes deeper. While we may not agree with the conclusions they have reached about how to live a Christian life in a modern secular society, we admire their commitment. Many people believe that the Amish reject modern technology, but the truth is, they accept modern technology for some uses but reject it if they believe it threatens their community and their religious practices. For example, many Amish use electricity for some work-related tasks, but they reject the idea of being connected to the utility grid, so they produce their

own electricity with gasoline or diesel generators. Likewise, they might use a tractor to operate a power-take off to transfer grain into a silo, but they will not use the tractor for plowing or other field work. Rather than strictly shunning technology, what Amish practice exhibits is a rational, thoughtful analysis of what technology means to their community and lifestyle. I am afraid that too often, most of us simply adopt whatever new technology comes down the pike; like most “modern” people we just cannot imagine that newer might not really be better. So we embrace the newest technology and hold it close to our bosoms and then seem to be surprised sometimes when it bites us rather than serves us. A couple of years ago I was listening to a talk show on a roman catholic program, in which an expert on pornography was talking about its pervasive presence in our culture. Where do most teenagers access pornography today? On the internet, of course — but with what Internet tool? On their cell phones. Many parents have learned the lesson about monitoring their children’s use of the home computer, but then we give them internet-ready cell phones and never think a thing about what they might be doing with them other than texting or making the rare actual phone call. This is an example of the type of thing I believe we need to be more careful about — adopting the widespread use of a new technology without really thinking about the implications it might have for our families and our moral sensibilities.

One of the remarkable things about Amish culture is the success with which they keep their children in their religious community. As part of the Anabaptist tradition, the Amish practice adult believer’s baptism, and generally young people are not baptized until their late teens or early twenties. Before making the commitment that baptism represents, some Amish families encourage their children to leave their community and go experience life among the “English” (what they call non-Amish people). This practice is called *Rumspringa*, which roughly translates to ‘running around time.’² The remarkable thing is — a high percentage of these young

people come back and embrace their faith and lifestyle of their parents. Even after being encouraged to give it a try, they found nothing in our modern world and culture that seemed to be attractive to them — at least not attractive enough to make them give up their close-knit families and communities. Because they have large families and a high percentage of their children remain in the Amish faith, Amish communities are growing rapidly; some estimates suggest the Amish population of the U.S. doubles about every twenty years. When we consider how many evangelical Christian parents grieve over children that leave the faith, we have to wonder why is there such a contrast between our churches and families and those of the Amish? Could it be that we have compromised with the world and society to the point where our children see no great contrast, and thus no compelling reason to embrace our beliefs and lifestyles? Drive through the typical sub-division and observe the houses and cars, or go to the mall and observe the shopping habits and the style of dress. Is there anything you see that can help you distinguish the Christians from the non-believers?

Of course, I am wiring this reflection on a modern computer with word processing software, and I did some of the background research on the internet, and

ordered one of the books I read through an Internet retailer. So I am not suggesting we have to abandon modern technology in a wholesale fashion. But I admit I am a little nervous — how much is my embrace of the “modern American way” a threat to my Christian commitment? Have I compromised a commitment to Christ by running the rat race of modern life without much reflection on what it means for my faith, my family and the Christian community within this society? To many of us, some of the choices the Amish have made seem a little extreme and foolish—but what if it turns out that, in fact, it is we who have been the fools?

¹This remarkable story is told in Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2007

² Susan L. Trollinger, *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) p. 14. A little pamphlet that is helpful in learning about Amish culture is Donald B. Kraybill, *The Amish: Why They Enchant Us* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003).

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