

# The Patient and Disciplined Faith of the Amish

*Luke 21:19 In your patience possess ye your souls!*



Oct. 2 marked the fourth anniversary of the tragic schoolhouse shooting in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania USA, when a non-Amish neighbor unleashed his anger toward God for allowing his firstborn daughter to die nine years earlier. He shot 10 young Amish girls execution style, killing five and seriously injuring the rest before turning the gun on himself.

Within hours of the shooting, several Amish people, at their own initiative, visited the gunman's widow and his parents and offered words of grace and forgiveness.

Other expressions of forgiveness by Amish people for the gunman and his family soon followed. More than half of those at his burial were Amish neighbors, some of whom had buried their own children the day before. The story of forgiveness startled the world. Why did Amish people offer almost instantaneous forgiveness in the wake of such a tragedy?

As I interviewed them after the shooting, I discovered that old-fashioned obedience explained their forgiveness. They said that they were simply obeying Jesus' instructions to love enemies and forgive transgressors. Moreover, obeying God lies at the heart of their faith.

As I talked with parents I found that obedience is also the key to Amish child rearing. While modern child rearing emphasizes individualism, independence, choice and self-actualization, the Amish accent obedience, respect for authority and cooperation with others.

When asked, "What are the most important things to teach children?" one Amish grandmother replied, "To work and to obey." These words would hardly top the list of child-rearing goals in modern households. For many of us, obedience training applies mostly to dogs. In Amish life it pertains to people, beginning with children. Amish child-rearing literature abounds with references to obedience because it's a core value of their faith. In Amish eyes, disobedience is a sin, a signpost on the road to eternal damnation.



Most Christians would agree that children should obey their parents. But Amish understandings of obedience go deeper: Church members follow church regulations such as not owning cars because compliance signals their obedience to God. By teaching their children the habits of obedience, parents point them toward heaven and safeguard them from hell.



I told Hannah, an Amish mother of seven, that many non-Amish people are astonished that Amish offspring are so quiet, well mannered and well behaved. "Why might that be?" I asked. Without hesitation or a trace of humor, she responded, "Oh, it's the spanking that makes them so nice."

Hannah explained that, when children are about two years old, their wills need to be broken. If it's not done at that stage, she said, they will likely become disobedient, rebellious adults. The spanking helps correct them and "make them nice." Another

mother explained that when children learn to fold their hands at prayer time, they are old enough to be reprimanded with light spanks when disobedient.

Amish parents turn to the words of King Solomon to support corporal discipline: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (Proverbs 13:24). They also note that the book of Hebrews suggests that God disciplines Christians as a father disciplines a son and that such discipline yields "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11).

Parents are quick to say, however, that spanking and other forms of physical discipline should never be done in anger or frustration. The child should understand the reason for discipline so that "punishment ends on a happy note, sweet and forgiving," says Naomi, a mother. She adds that because correction ultimately "leads to happiness ... [discipline] must be the result of our love for the child's happiness, both now and in the hereafter."



These links -- between spanking, happiness and heaven -- provide the framework for Amish child discipline, an approach that nurtures obedience instead of individuality. It's a framework that disturbs modern sensitivities. Naomi disagrees. In fact, she believes that letting children go without

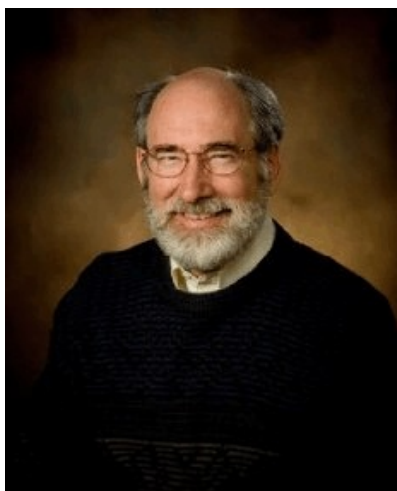


discipline is "the cruelest kind of child abuse." She poses the question rhetorically: "Now wouldn't it be abusive above all abuses to withhold from our children the training they need for a life of discipline and self-control, of service to God?"

This counter cultural view of child rearing lies at the heart of Amish society. We can praise the Amish for their forgiving response at Nickel Mines and we may yearn for a simpler

and less frazzled Amish-style life. We may even seek to sew some patches of Amish faith onto our own spirituality and instill some old-fashioned virtues into the lives of our own children. Such fine intentions will fail, the Amish contend, without a generous dose of obedience training.

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Elizabethtown, Pa. Among his many publications, he has authored, coauthored, or edited eight books on Amish society. *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) is his flagship book that explains why the Amish are thriving. *Amish Grace* and *The Amish Way* (both by Jossey-Bass) explore Amish forgiveness and spirituality. His *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites and Mennonites* is the only book that provides an overview of some 200 Anabaptist groups in North America.