

# Ways to Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Perspective from the Amish

**Jeff Bach**

*Genocide Awareness and Action Week Lecture, April 6, 2015*

Jeff Bach is Director of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College.

For this year's Genocide Awareness and Action Week on campus, Juniata College has chosen the theme of Survivorship and Reconciliation as its focus. Tonight, I want to offer one small set of stories. They will not resolve, nor even fully define, the problems related to reconciliation and genocide. Rather, I want to tell some stories of a small religious minority who have responded to a specific atrocity with forgiveness and reconciliation. I do not suggest that this is a pattern that can be prescribed for all cases of atrocity, mass killing, or genocide. I do offer these stories and the background that shapes them as a starting point for wrestling with the very difficult problems of forgiveness, but also the great hope for a different future where forgiveness is operative. These stories come from a specific subgroup of Christians and should not be seen as a generic, universal prescription. However, these stories reflect the power of this subgroup's habits of forgiveness, and the power of imagining changed relationships because of forgiveness. I will first introduce the story of the shooting of ten Amish school girls at Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County in 2006 and the response of the Amish community there to reach out with grace to the family of the shooter, who took his own life. For the details of these events, and some of the responses I report tonight, I am indebted to Donald B. Kraybill, Senior Fellow at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, who collaborated with Steven M. Nolt and David Weaver-Zercher on the book, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* that was published in 2007—within a year of the events they describe. Then, I will describe some of the background for why the Amish moved to forgive. Finally, I want to talk about a current analogous situation among members of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria as they respond with forgiveness, prayer, and love in the face of enduring attacks against them by radicalized Muslims in Boko Haram. For much of this information, I am indebted to news reports from the Church of the Brethren denominational offices and personal conversations with Nigerian Brethren friends. With all of these stories, I propose that forgiveness can offer a way to imagine changed relationships in the wake of atrocity that can open possibilities for healing.

Forgiveness, as Kraybill and his associates define it, “involves an offense, an offender, and a victim,” or, as he points out in this case, “a victimized community,” where the victim “foregoes the right to revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer.”<sup>1</sup> Forgiveness might involve concrete actions, as was the case in the Amish community. It might also involve positive feelings directed toward the offender. Kraybill, Nolt and Weaver-Zercher add some expansions to their definitions. Pardon is different from forgiveness, because pardon releases the offender from any retaliation for the offense, including legal retribution. Reconciliation differs even more, because it seeks to restore or create a new relationship between the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) of the offense. As these authors point out, reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness to be offered.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, forgiveness is an important component in the movement toward reconciliation. For our purposes, these definitions will serve as a beginning point for this presentation and our discussion.

#### A SUNNY, WARM MONDAY WITH CLEAR BLUE SKIES

On a sunny, warm Monday with clear blue skies, October 2, 2006, twenty-six children from Amish families walked to the West Nickel Mines School near Georgetown in southern Lancaster County.<sup>3</sup> As I tell this story, I am indebted to the narrative provided by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt and David Weaver-Zercher in *Amish Grace*. The children ranged in age from six to thirteen. Their twenty-year-old teacher, Emma, had taught there for two years. This Monday was a little unusual because Emma’s mother and sister, and two of Emma’s sisters-in-law, were visiting the school for the day. One of the younger visitors was expecting a baby.

By 9:00 a.m., Charlie Roberts, a milk truck driver who picked up milk from dairy farms in the area, was loading guns, ammunition, plastic ties for restraints and other supplies for barricading the doors of the school into a borrowed pickup truck.<sup>4</sup> He had planned his assault carefully, including leaving behind suicide notes for his family to read later that day. He drove to an auction barn across from the school and watched as the children finished recess and went back inside the building. Shortly after 10:15 a.m., he backed the truck to the main entrance of the school. When the teacher came to the door, he asked the teacher if she and the students could help him find a piece of metal along the road similar to one he held in his hand. He went back to the truck and then entered the school with weapons. Emma, the teacher, ran out a side door with her mother to the closest farm and called 911 about 10:35 a.m. Roberts started to bind the feet of some of the girls with the zip ties. Soon he forced the visitors and all of the boys out of the school. Another girl, Emma, heard a voice say “Run,” and she did, leaving ten girls inside the school. No one else who was in the building heard the voice.<sup>5</sup>

By 10:44 a.m., state troopers started to arrive on the scene. Roberts had nailed boards over the doors and had pulled down the blinds. He talked about intending to molest the girls, and said he needed to

“punish some Christian girls” to settle his anger with God over the death of his daughter who had died right after birth nine years earlier.<sup>6</sup> The troopers interrupted Roberts’ plan. He phoned 911 at 10:55 a.m. and told the operator to clear the troopers off the property or he would kill everyone inside. One of the thirteen-year-old girls, Marian, told him to shoot her first. About 11:05 a.m., Roberts shot all ten girls. He fired one shotgun blast through the window at the troopers but missed. The troopers stormed the building, only to see Roberts fire one last shot into his own head.

Emergency response personnel had already begun arriving on the scene. The shooting victims were transported by helicopter and emergency vehicles beginning at 11:21 am. Police cordoned off an area around the school to keep out onlookers and, most importantly, the media. Throughout the day, police worked very hard to keep journalists from photographing the Amish families associated with the school. The Amish believe it is wrong to have their pictures taken because it is breaking the biblical commandment not to make a graven image. Also, they avoid media attention because of their desire to live peaceable quiet lives, a desire cruelly shattered on this day. Journalists began reporting the events, and the highly efficient system of Amish word-of-mouth spread the terrible news. About one hundred relatives of the school girls gathered at the farm where their teacher had phoned for help, waiting for identities of the fatalities and surviving injured girls to be released. Within sixteen hours of the shooting, families knew that five of the girls had died and five were seriously injured.

## ANABAPTISM

The Amish are a small subgroup of Mennonites, the latter deriving from the Reformation era of the 1520s and 1530s in Europe. The Mennonites were part of the Anabaptist movement. Their name means “rebaptizers,” a term their enemies used for those who practiced adult baptism upon confession of faith. At the time, adult Anabaptists who were candidates for baptism would have already received infant baptism in the Catholic Church (and later in Protestant churches). Enemies of the Anabaptists accused them of rebaptizing—a crime punishable by death. The Anabaptists believed that their adult baptism was their only valid baptism because they had not been able to speak their own faith and confess their sins at the time of their infant baptism.<sup>7</sup>

The Anabaptist movement emerged first in Zürich, Switzerland, where the close friends of Ulrich Zwingli, the lead reformer, pulled away when he insisted on letting the city council decide the scope and pace of reform. This small group, led by Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, George Blaurock and others, held their first adult baptism in January 1525. Immediately, Zwingli and the city council took measures to suppress them, even as their preaching and faith won new adherents in the villages all around Zürich.<sup>8</sup> Anabaptism also appeared soon afterward under the direction of different leaders in other areas, including southern Germany, Austria, and eventually northern Germany and the Netherlands. Persecution drove

some Anabaptists to Moravia, part of today's Czech Republic. Not all of the Anabaptist groups in these various centers were directly connected. Anabaptism was a movement, not a centralized theological reform shaped by one thinker (as was the case with the Lutheran reform and Calvinism).

Most Anabaptist groups held several shared beliefs that were stated in a short confession of faith, the Schleitheim Confession, created in southern Germany with Swiss influence in 1527. The Schleitheim confession called for adult baptism and the use of church discipline, including a ban on those who break church teachings, and it endorsed a symbolic understanding of the bread and cup in the Lord's Supper.<sup>9</sup> The Anabaptists upheld separation of the church from secular authorities. They also set up measures to choose ministers, or "shepherds," from within the congregation for a non-salaried ministry. The Anabaptists also rejected the swearing of oaths and the use of violence ("the sword"). The Schleitheim Confession calls on believers to practice the teachings and examples of Jesus to love enemies, to forgive those who inflict harm, and to suffer rather than to take revenge. Love for enemies is one of the distinctive teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, and the Anabaptists wanted to return to these New Testament teachings, in contrast to the waging of war that the Roman Catholic Church had permitted during the Middle Ages, a concession that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions also accepted.

Because of their adult baptizing, their admonitions to obey the New Testament teachings, and the nearly universal refusal of Anabaptists to fight, they were persecuted severely. In 1527, Felix Mantz, one of the early leaders, was drowned in the Limat River in Zürich for having received adult baptism.<sup>10</sup>

Anabaptism emerged in the Netherlands and northern Germany around 1530. One part of the movement adopted a view that Christ would return very soon to execute judgment on the godless. A few leaders radicalized this view and abandoned their earlier pacifism to take up a militant approach and take control of the city of Münster in northern Germany in 1534. Catholic and Protestant troops besieged the city and overran it in 1535, killing all inside.<sup>11</sup>

The remnant of Anabaptists in the North who did not go to Münster aligned with a Dutch priest, Menno Simons, who converted to the Anabaptist movement in 1536 at the fall of Münster. Menno had always been a pacifist Anabaptist. He steered the movement back to its Christ-centered pacifism, anchored in biblical teachings, rather than in the visions and prophecies of the Münster leaders.<sup>12</sup>

In the Netherlands and northern Germany, Anabaptism spread quickly, but was also suppressed equally quickly. In the Anabaptist centers in the Netherlands, as well as in southern Germany and Switzerland, women held important roles in the movement in the earliest years. In some cases, women served as spokespersons or teachers for the faith, although they were not recognized as ministers. Anneken Hendriks, who was burned on a ladder because of her faith, had a reputation for being a teacher of Anabaptists.<sup>13</sup> Another martyr, Maeyeken Wens, was not a teacher, but wrote moving letters to her children and relatives about her sureness of faith, bidding them to join her in faith, and to love and pray

for her persecutors. Maria van Beckum was from a noble family near Deventer. She supported the Dutch Anabaptist movement. A hymn in the Anabaptist hymnal, the *Ausbund* (which is still used by the Amish), tells part of her story.

Joris Wippe was taken to Dordrecht for execution and the executioner was so moved by his moral life that he could not carry out the sentence. Andries Langedul in Antwerp was suspected of being an Anabaptist because he knew the Bible so well.

As early as the 1500s, stories of Anabaptist martyrs, their faith, and their forgiveness had been collected. Finally, in 1660, Thieleman Janszoon van Braght brought out the great compilation known as the *Martyrs Mirror*. By this time the Dutch Mennonites had acculturated to the comforts and wealth of Dutch society, even abandoning their pacifism. Van Braght hoped to call them back to their more radical heritage.

#### WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH THE AMISH AT NICKEL MINES?

The Amish formed in 1693 under the leadership of Jacob Ammann, who thought that the Swiss Mennonites were growing too lax in their faith. Primarily, he stressed church discipline, the banning and even shunning of people who transgressed the teachings of the church. His group separated and became known as the Amish, a subgroup of the larger Swiss Mennonite tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Although they were never fiercely persecuted like the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, they suffered similar repressive measures by Swiss and German governments. They identified readily with the legacy of suffering of their Anabaptist forebears. Their esteem for tradition, for biblical teachings, and for certain Mennonite devotional texts allowed the Amish to keep alive the memory of suffering for faith when necessary, and the importance of peace and forgiveness.

The Amish still value the stories of faithfulness in the face of suffering conveyed by *Martyrs Mirror*, which was first fully translated into German and printed at the Ephrata Cloister in Lancaster County in 1748. One of the stories that they and other Anabaptists who know the book treasure is the story of Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist from Asperen.<sup>15</sup> In the winter of 1569, Dirk was escaping from one of the people hired to catch Anabaptists and ran across a frozen stream. The pursuer broke through the ice during the chase. Dirk turned back and pulled the man out of the frozen stream, saving his life. Dirk was handed over in arrest and sentenced to be burned at the stake. The sentence was carried out in May 1569. For Anabaptists, the account of Dirk is one of the iconic stories of forgiveness and love for enemy.

This all relates to the way the Amish offered grace and forgiveness to the widow of Charlie Roberts, the shooter at Nickel Mines, and to Charlie's parents. Even as Amish families were burying their daughters in the days after the shooting, some joined with other members of the Amish community and

visited the parents and widow of Charlie to assure them that they had no hard feelings against any of the Roberts family, and to express forgiveness toward Charlie, even though he was dead.

Media soon picked up reactions of astonishment from the broader public that the members of the Amish community would offer forgiveness so quickly and seemingly so easily. Most of the Amish were surprised that anyone would think that the Amish would even question whether they could forgive Charlie Roberts or his family. Several Amish people said that forgiving is just what they do, what they have to do, if they wish to be forgiven by God.

This double surprise is an interesting point of contrast in ways of thinking about ethics. As Don Kraybill and his team pointed out, the Amish were habituated to forgiveness.<sup>16</sup> Sacred stories and injunctions from the Bible, their understanding of the life of Jesus, and treasured stories like that of Dirk Willems all reinforce to them that they are a community forgiven by God and also graced to forgive others. For them, ethics is not a decision made in one fixed moment in time. Members of the Amish community would not typically sit down and ask themselves privately what kind of response a situation calls for, and then calculate the moral values of the options before making a volitional decision of what to do. For the Amish, ethics are communally determined. They are raised within a context of strong relationships that offer forgiveness because that is the way of nonviolence. They realize that it can be costly and may cause suffering, but their sacred stories of Jesus and their spiritual ancestors keep the possibility of suffering as a corollary to forgiveness—especially in light of their understanding of Jesus’ suffering in order to forgive sins. So there is no single point of time for an ethical decision for most members of the Amish community. Rather, forgiveness grows out of how they are trained from childhood. On the morning of the shooting at Nickel Mines, Emma had started the day by reading Acts 4 to the children, a story that speaks of the Christians having all things together and devoting themselves to the teachings of the disciples.

By contrast, many people in the broader American culture tend not to live in settings of multiple, very close relationships that are maintained over a lifetime in one community.<sup>17</sup> Most Americans grow up in fragmented family relationships. Social media and other types of electronic communication create frequent, episodic, and short communications.<sup>18</sup> Face-to-face relationships with extended periods of time together, talking, and listening without interruptions or intrusions are rare. In a society that highly prizes individualism, Americans tend to see ethical decisions as isolated moments or points of decision that are exercised by individual volition. One might ask someone for advice, but also perhaps not. Context might matter, or it might not. This mode of ethical decision-making underestimates the influences of complex networks of relational influences and ethical thinking—perhaps episodic and fragmentary—that impinge on ethical decision-making. At the same time, those influences rarely habituate people in wider American

culture for sustained ethics of habit, or as Stanley Hauerwas might say, ethics shaped by an ethical community of character.<sup>19</sup>

## FORGIVENESS, HEALING, AND THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN IN NIGERIA

As I said at the beginning, the story of Nickel Mines is very specific to the Amish community. It is very specifically Christian, tied to a very specific sub-group's understanding of Christian faith that values peace and forgiveness and allows that suffering may be a part of living ethically. The Amish response to the atrocity at Nickel Mines is not a cookie-cutter template that can be transferred to just any person or group. And to be clear, the Amish have suffered no genocide. Certainly, no Anabaptists were the target of genocide on the scales that we have seen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Yet, I invite us to think about the role that imagination and stories of ethical character might play in dealing with forgiveness and healing. For the Amish, their shared life around shared views of Jesus as the source of forgiveness and peace, and the relational fabric of community allow them to imagine the possibility of forgiveness where forgiveness may seem impossible to others.

Another story of imagination that is current, but differently located, is the story of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Since 2009, when the radicalized Muslim group Boko Haram turned to more outright violence, attacking churches and killing parishioners, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria has responded with prayer, with love, and even with some material assistance to moderate Muslims whose economic lives were disrupted either by Boko Haram or by other non-pacifist Christians who targeted Muslims for retaliation. Thousands of Nigerian Brethren have been killed, along with other Christians and moderate Muslims. Millions of Nigerians from many religious traditions have been displaced into refugee life by the violence. Of course, one year ago—on April 15, 2014—Boko Haram members kidnapped almost 300 school girls from the town of Chibok. The large majority of them were Brethren. A few have escaped within the past year. In April and May of 2015, several hundred captives of Boko Haram were rescued, but they did not include the Chibok girls.

Meanwhile, members of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria continue to pray for their attackers and call on the church to respond with love for them and to pray for them. For the Brethren in Nigeria, the stories of Jesus in the New Testament continue to create new imaginations of relationships of forgiveness—not retribution—for the future. That imagination brings with it intense suffering as parents lose their children in death, people are killed in worship, and whole towns are uprooted and sent into refugee life.

Genocide is a profound evil that is not readily overcome. There is no easy, formulaic answer. Many ethicists and survivors of genocide rightly ask whether forgiveness is even possible. Some ask if

forgiveness after genocide could ever be moral. I know of no single, global or universal answer to those questions.

I would suggest, however, that answers and ethics are strongly shaped by what kind of relationships and stories impinge on any one of us, no matter how fragmentary or how flawed those networks of relationship may be for many people in the broader American culture. Perhaps the assumptions of individual agency, and the sense that an individual can arrive at enough ethical knowledge to make an individual decision, are flawed by the lack of power to imagine possibilities that arise from alternative stories that are grounded in shared community relationships.

Such imagination might help people as they wrestle to come to terms with the profound suffering and evil of genocide.

At least for the Amish in the Nickel Mines community, as with the Nigerian Brethren, their imagination and communal character drawn from the story of Jesus helped them to forgive—to turn back to the extended Roberts family, and like Dirk Willems returning to his jailer, stretch out their hands, reaching to preserve life through forgiveness and healing.

## NOTES

1. Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2007), p. xiii.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-27.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
7. C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), p. 88.
8. Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), pp. 341-345.
9. John Howard Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 36-42.
10. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, pp. 102-111, 114-16.
11. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, pp. 211-221. For some of the original radical views of northern Anabaptism, see Melchior Hoffmann, “The Ordinance of God,” trans. George Hunston Williams, in George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, trans. and eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 190-197.
12. Menno Simons, *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), pp. 108-118.
13. The comments about Hendriks, Wens, van Beckum, Wippe and Langedul are taken from *Martyrs Mirror*, the large anthology of Anabaptist martyr stories compiled by Thieleman Janszoon van Braght and first published in 1660. See Thieleman Janszoon van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 13th ed., (Scottsdale, PA:

- Herald Press, 1982). The stories are found on pp. 872-873 (Hendriks), 979-980 (Wens), 467 (van Beckum), 551 and 554 (Wippe) and 633-634 (Andries Langedul).
14. Donald B. Kraybill, Karen Johnson-Weiner and Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 26-34.
  15. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, pp. 741-742.
  16. Kraybill, Nolt and Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace*, pp. 67-74, 85-98.
  17. See for example Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 23-44, 93-111.
  18. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pp. 13-17. See also Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), pp. 217-220.
  19. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* pp. 95-99.