

Book Review

Andrew V. Ste. Marie and Mike Atnip. *Grounded Upon God's Word: The Life and Labors of Jakob Ammann*. Manchester MI: Sermon on the Mount Publishers, 2020. Pp. 164.

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We live in a time of revisionist history. Sometimes this revisionism is driven by ideology, sometimes it is driven by an attempt to check facts in order to correct the accepted record of the past. As authors Ste. Marie and Atnip state in *Grounded Upon God's Word*, “The following chapters are the story of Jakob Ammann, de-stereotyped” (4). Indeed, most retellings of the Amish division of 1693 tend to favor the position of Hans Reist and others who opposed the changes to accepted Swiss Brethren practices that Ammann insisted upon. The authors are careful as they look at the available evidence and try to be clear when there is ambiguity in the record. They also make use of the limited primary sources available and various interpretive articles, such as those published by *Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 2000. Perhaps the best approach to evaluating the question of the Amish division would be to read a typical account of it, such as the article on the division in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (at GAMEO.org) and compare it with the title being reviewed here.

One delightful aspect of *Grounded Upon God's Word* is the contrast the authors draw in the first chapter between two very different, though religious, men of that time: Jakob Ammann and Oliver Cromwell. Paradoxically, both believed they were advancing God's kingdom in this world and purifying the church, but one used the sword to affect this, while the other used exhortation and the relational pressure of shunning. Another intriguing historical comparison at the end of the book is between Ammann and William Penn, both of whom were born in 1644. Both were men who believed God expected personal commitment to God and adherence to nonresistance. Penn's acquisition of the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681 and his promotion of it to nonresistant Christians in Germany as a place of religious freedom opened a new horizon for groups like the Amish. In colonial Pennsylvania the Amish flourished.

Before dealing with the actual Amish division, the authors provide historical background to help readers recognize the challenges of living in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when the division occurred. The recurring Black Death, wars too numerous to name, and



harsh climatic conditions caused by the Little Ice Age make clear that even without the state opposition that the Anabaptists suffered, life was difficult. On top of these circumstances, the Anabaptists also experienced harassment at the hands of the state.

Despite these difficulties, there is evidence that the Anabaptists experienced times of rejuvenation and growth. One of these times was the mid-seventeenth century, and it seems to have brought in many new believers, including Jakob Ammann. The authors carefully tie together various strands of evidence from that time to indicate what may have happened, all the while being careful to indicate where they are drawing from written records and where they are speculating. One of the interesting possibilities behind the Amish division may be that many of those who sided with Ammann seemed to have been among those more recently converted to the Swiss Brethren. Newly converted members are often more fervent than those whose roots extend back to the origin of the movement.

Grounded Upon God's Word is honest about the strong points and the weak points of both sides in the dispute. The Bernese Anabaptists with roots in the origin of the Anabaptist movement may have adopted certain attitudes and practices to avoid the worst aspects of state persecution, but they also had a strong positive witness among their Reformed neighbors. Ammann and his people may have seen a real need for changes, but they also, by their own account, acted too harshly and too hastily.

After carefully laying out the events of the disagreement and the increasing bitterness that ultimately resulted in schism, *Grounded Upon God's Word* points out the later recognition on the part of the Amish side that they, too, had fault in the division, a recognition that prompted their moves toward reconciliation. Unfortunately, those effort failed, and the two groups continued on their own paths, all the while recognizing their common history but also their distinctive aspects.

The final chapter of the book records a letter by Ulli Ammann, who the authors believe was a brother of Jakob. In the letter we see a man who had a strong sense of how the church ought to proceed in this world, and also an awareness of mistakes that had been made and ought to be avoided in the future. The guidance given in the document continues to be followed by many Amish today.

Today there are more than 350,000 Amish in the world. The number greatly increases when you add to it the number of people descended from the Amish but no longer actually part of the Amish church. This book is an engaging and sympathetic effort to explain the events that divided the Swiss Brethren into the Amish and Mennonite branches. Both those with roots in the Anabaptist movement and those with interest in church history should read *Grounded Upon God's Word* in order to fully understanding their own roots or the roots of this branch of God's people who are known today for their simple lifestyle and their commitment to nonresistance.

The authors made an honest attempt to look at the events afresh. One of the fascinating observations I had as I read this book and a few of the older, more pro-Reist accounts was how difficult it can be to ascertain the attitudes and motives of either side, even when reading primary sources. Reading *Grounded Upon God's Word* can help us be more careful as we evaluate events of the past, or even as we engage others now in disputes or disagreements.