

Book Review

Our Amish Heritage. Middlefield, OH: Geauga Amish Historical Library, 2021. Pp. 67.

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What does it mean to be Amish? This question is usually asked by non-Amish people looking at the Amish culture. But how should a person within the Amish perceive their own identity? This is the primary question addressed in the book *Our Amish Heritage*, published by the Geauga Amish Historical Library. The committee that wrote the book answers this question by delving back into the history of the Amish and explaining actions and decisions of their ancestors since the Reformation.

The book itself is under 100 pages, which enables the story to remain concise and attractive to readers of different ages and abilities. It is divided into 14 chapters, and each chapter focuses upon a particular subject or time in history. This format was utilized because the main reason the Geauga Amish Historical Library undertook this project was to publish a booklet appropriate for Amish parochial schools. The book also engages its intended audience through numerous illustrations and photographs relating to the text. The sentence structure and vocabulary are also suitable for a younger readership. Lesser-known words are occasionally accompanied by definitions.

The story begins with a short summary of the birth of the Christian faith in Jerusalem and the change that Emperor Constantine brought to the church through the alignment of the Christian church and the state. Next, the actions and beliefs of Anabaptism during the Reformation and the beginning of the Amish church in the late seventeenth century are clearly outlined. There is a distinct emphasis on doctrines and events relevant to the Amish today, including nonresistance (*Wehrlosigkeit*), the origins of the *Ausbund* hymnal, and the Dordrecht Confession of 1632.

The latter half of the book describes the immigration of the Amish to Pennsylvania and their movement west to Ohio and beyond. The final chapters explain the struggles the Amish faced during the twentieth century during times of war, the beginning of the parochial schools, the efforts to win exemption from Social Security, and decisions about using technology. The closing chapter proposes a short reflection on how the Amish heritage and history offers a good alternative to modern society and an opportunity to follow Christ.

As the title, *Our Amish Heritage*, suggests, the book is primarily intended for an Amish audience. The numerous reflective questions asked throughout the book encourage readers to



examine their understanding of their heritage. A possible criticism of this work is the presence of Amish bias and the oversimplification of developments in Anabaptist history. For example, the beginning of Anabaptism is described as a movement starting in Zurich, Switzerland, that consisted of the principles laid out in the Schleitheim Confession. Anabaptist leaders and congregations not subscribing to the Schleitheim Confession are ignored. However, the intention of *Our Amish Heritage* must not be forgotten: to teach Amish students the history of their denomination and forefathers. An exhaustive analysis of the complex events in Anabaptist history would not be appropriate.

This book is also relevant to persons outside the Amish world. Many facets of Amish culture that baffle non-Amish people are explained and studied. For example, Chapter 13 reveals why the Amish do not permit car ownership but will hire a taxi driver. Car ownership could endanger the “close-knit families and churches” (61). This claim is more accurate and satisfactory than the notion that Amish simply reject all forms of modern technology. This book is in many ways like listening to a knowledgeable Amish elder instructing a curious grandchild who is interested in how the Amish came to be and why certain practices formed.

Our Amish Heritage is an informative introduction to Amish history partnered with an explanation of the decisions the Amish made in the past and continue to make today. It is written in a simple and easy-to-understand manner, perfect for adolescents and adults who wish to understand Amish culture or what it means to be Amish.

Erratum

12/5/2022: Activated links in PDF file.