

WHAT'S AMISS WITH THE AMISH

The Problem of Requiring Forgiveness

"There was not one desk, not one chair, in the whole schoolroom that was not splattered with either blood or glass. There were bullet holes everywhere," said Janice Ballenger, a coroner in Lancaster County, Pa. One seven year old, Naomi Rose, was shot 20 times.

Yet in the face of this slaughter, the Amish forgave the murderer.

"If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven," said Sam S. Stoltzfus of the Amish community. "We all want to go to heaven, so we need to forgive."

Will God *not* forgive you if you don't forgive others?

A local Christian pastor told how the Amish grandfather of one of the murdered girls told some Amish boys: "We must not think evil of this man."

The pastor was effusive: "It was one of the most touching things I have seen in 25 years of Christian ministry." Really? Is it good to react to terrible crimes with automatic forgiveness?

To be sure, the Amish can appeal to some strong Bible verses for their view of forgiveness:

- Matt 6:14-15: "For **if you do not forgive** men their trespasses, **neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**"

- Matt: 18:21-22: "Then Peter said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but **seventy times seven.**'"

- Matt 18:34-35: And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to you, if you do not forgive your brother **from your heart.**"

On the other hand, the Bible also says, "Let those who love the Lord hate evil" (Ps 97:10).

Manipulating Forgiveness to Control Others

The problem is that because sin is pervasive, even the best things in the world – like forgiveness – can be twisted for evil purposes. For example:

- Think of the abusive spouse who says, "You have to forgive me" – and continues to abuse.
- Think of the alcoholic who says, "You have to forgive me" and continues to drink to excess.
- Think of the manipulative person at work or church who says, "You have to forgive me" – and continues to manipulate.

Is it good to be patient? Generally yes, but not if your child is running into traffic.

Is it good to forgive? Generally yes, but not if means pretending that evil isn't real and repulsive. So what do we do? Luther said:

"Scripture is not to be understood as against, but for Christ, hence it either refers to him, or is not to be reckoned true Scripture. . . . For if opponents use Scripture against Christ, we use Christ against Scripture" (LW 34:112).

The Amish axiom – that you *have to* forgive or God won't forgive you – is an implicit attack on the cross. It implies that the cross is insufficient and must be supplemented by our forgiveness.

To the contrary, the promises of God are certain because they are based on what Christ has done on the cross. Our salvation is certain because it is outside of us, in spite of us – by the cross alone.

As a consequence we are free – free to use our heads in the battles of life. We are not bound to react to terrible crimes with automatic absolution. In fact, we are called to be as wise as serpents and to do what is necessary to restrain evil. For example:

- The loving response to an alcoholic is not endless forgiveness but getting the person into AA.
- The loving response to an abusive spouse, employer, or church leader is to leave the situation.
- The loving response to the murder of children is not automatic or "sentimental" forgiveness but resisting evil for the sake of the weak.

Doing What's Needed to Reduce Harm

Finally, some say you should forgive like the Amish because it's good for your health. It's good to let go of bad feelings about others.

"Forgiveness" may or may not be good for you. It depends on the particular circumstances. And any psychological benefits of forgiveness should not be confused with the Christian's freedom from having to "feel" a certain way and freedom for doing what's needed to reduce harm.

The Christian's calling is to care for the neighbor using common sense and even the sword when needed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced the evil of his day by joining the plot to kill Hitler. Many of his fellow churchgoers were pacifists and put their trust in diplomacy. Who was the better neighbor to those who were sent to concentration camps?