Interview with former Amishman Joe Keim

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Q: Why do Amish separate themselves from the world and modern conveniences?
A: Frequently used passages in Amish church from the Sermon on the Mount "blessed are the poor in spirit…blessed are the meek…blessed are they that mourn" (Matt 5:3ff). In the German translation that reads "*saved* are the…" So they believe they must go through life in humility and hard work in order to gain favor with God

Q: How did you view God when you were Amish?
A: Fearfully, ready to club me whenever I did something wrong.

Q: How did you think you would make it to heaven, and what were you taught that God required of you?
A:

(1) Obey parents
(2) When I arrived at the age of accountability (c. 17), I would begin the process of becoming a member and then
(3) Be baptized and follow the rules

Q: If you did these three things, would you have assurance that you would go to heaven?
A: Absolutely none. To say that you would have assurance would be prideful or boasting (Lk 18:11-12)

Q: Is Bible study stressed?
A: The Bible was read very little; it was in German; thus unable to undersatnd. Bible studies strictly forbidden. Family Bible study every other Sunday (when no church service), but parents knew very little about the Bible

Q: Did you ever question the Amish religion as being true?
A: Never did until about 16-17; this is common for young teens. Is what my parents and church really what God wants? I went through that and began to question whether it was really true; I had questions that parents could not answer; most had to do with why we lived the way we did, and why we did the things we did. The answer was always "our forefathers did it this way, and we don't ask questions we just do what we've been taught."

Q: Could non-Amish Christian denominations be saved?
A: While never really discussed, it is basically viewed this way: They are different paths up the mountain; as long as they obey their parents and church, we would all meet up at the top of the mountain. So we didn't really judge them, that's between them and God; but I have to be Amish because I was born Amish. If one is born Amish, he must remain Amish in order to be saved.

Q: What happened that convinced you that the Amish religion wasn't true?
A: Probably Eph 2:8-9. When this was pointed out to me, I realized that salvation was a gift that could not possibly be earned, it was a gift that had to be received. When that sank in, I realized that the Amish religion was works, and it was contrary to the Word of God. I realized that I was not good enough to get to heaven, and I accepted Christ.

Q: **How did your parents and community react to your new belief?**
A: They almost immediately turned me off; I was very open about it.

Q: **How does shunning affect an ostracized Amish person?**
A: On the basis of 1 Cor 5, the church delivers you over to Satan—you become part of Satan's family. So they cut off all connection with you.

Q: What is the plan of salvation Amish style?
A: In short, it is works salvation. (1) Parental obedience is a part of salvation; a child is considered to be under the parents' authority until the child dies. They are informed at a young age that if they leave and go against their parents' will there is no hope for them to ever make it to heaven. (2) Getting baptized and joining the church is another essential part of salvation. (3) Following the articles of faith as set forth by forefathers and the rules that pertain to that church at that time. (4) They believe that you must believe that Jesus is the Son of God, died, was raised from the dead, but it is a head knowledge, and in reality this is at the bottom of the list. It's just a part of the package.

Q: Do the Amish believe in the fundamentals of the faith?
A: The Bible is so low on the list when it comes to pushing rules and doctrine, and with an 8th grade education there almost no training. So you hear almost nothing about the deity of Christ, the Trinity, etc. I hadn't heard these things until we joined the church we're at know. Yes, they do believe in the fundamentals.

Q: When does one become a member of the Amish church and what is the process?
A: This varies between the different groups. In our group the process began at age 17, a 6 month training process. This training involved the importance of living the rules and staying Amish if we want to go to heaven. At the end of the process if we prove to them that we were serious, they would then have a baptismal service. During that service you would repeat a phrase-by-phrase prayer after the preacher saying "Yes, I believe Jesus is the Son of God." Then they poured water on their head. I was told that on that day all my sins were washed away, and I sincerely believed that.

Q: Are there different orders of Amish, and what makes them different?
A: Yes there are different orders; the basic difference is their ordnung, the written list of rules. Some are longer, some are shorter (more "liberal")

Q: Are the Amish people saved? Why or why not?
A: Yes, I believe there are some Amish people that are saved, particularly in the liberal churches, but they hang on to a lot of traditions. Its very hard to say. The more legalistic groups I just don't see many being saved; if they are, they definitely do not talk about it.

Q: Describe a typical Amish church service.
A: Usually start at 9:00a.m., over by 12:30. Two sermons are preached without a Bible or outline by men with an 8th grade education and absolutely no training. There is singing. Everything is done in German. They know English, Dutch, and German. All of their religious books (hymn, prayer, and Bible) are in the Martin Luther translation (high German).

Q: How does a man end up in a preacher position?
A: They have four positions: the bishop, the deacons, and two lay ministers. When one of these dies or moves out of the community, it is filled from another man in the church. They cast their votes and any man who gets three or more votes is put in a lot; those in the lot are seated on a bench, and given a song book. In one song book is a piece of paper, and whoever gets that one fills the position. It is like a funeral; the man who becomes the preacher that day starts crying as does the church as it is not an easy place to be in.

Q: What are the sermons about in the Amish church and who preaches them?
A: Either the bishop or lay ministers, the deacons never preach. They might have OT stories, some NT Scriptures (e.g. Rom 12:1; 1 John 2:15-17). Many stories that have been told for years and years about those who have left the Amish and there was no hope for them. They are scary stories. There is no verse by verse exposition of the Scriptures.

Q: Other than disobedience to the 10 commandments, what is considered a sin in the Amish religion?
A: Main ones are divorce, women cutting their hair or going without a head covering, birth control, jewelry, going to war, political or government activity, going against the traditions of the forefathers

Q: What is the *ordnung* or ordinance letter?
A: It is a handwritten list of rules that governs their clothing, home, work habits, lifestyles, everything. Twice a year this is read and people are reminded of the importance of living the rules. It is very legalistic. It reminds you of the OT law.

Q: What kind of issues does an Amish person face when he leaves the community?
A: When you leave the Amish you leave your family and friends, in most cases. You have to learn a brand new culture that you thought you knew but you really don't. Another thing is vulnerability; they trust everyone and people take advantage of them.

Q: Why do many ex-Amish once they leave reject all religion?
A: Probably because they are fed up with being told what to do and how to live they want no part of anything. So many go completely the opposite direction.

Q: What is the most important thing you would share with an Amish person?
A: Asking questions. They have been taught to live a certain way and they rely on what they've been taught and they never question it. They are not allowed to. But when you ask them questions, it makes them think. This is an excellent way to witness.

Q: How can you witness to them? Just go up to them?
A: It is more of a process than an event. Normally when you hand them a pamphlet they will just throw them away because they want no part of it and they are told by the church not to read anything outside their own books or information. Go where they are, don't wait for them to come to you. Crisis times especially. Gain their trust and respect. Ask questions that will make them think, e.g. how does an Amishman get to heaven? Get them to question their beliefs.