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Forgiveness and Shunning

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October 2nd marks the first anniversary of the schoolhouse shooting of ten Amish girls near Nickel Mines, Pa that left five of them dead and the others seriously injured. The killer shot himself as police stormed the one-room school. Within hours of the slaughter Amish people had forgiven the killer's widow and his family. The world marveled at the swift, almost instant forgiveness. Many commentators applauded the courage of the Amish to brush aside rage and extend grace so quickly in the face of an unthinkable tragedy.

Other pundits asked how the Amish could forgive so quickly and yet shun their own members who fall from grace. How could they refuse to forgive an Amish woman who found love in the arms of an outsider or a member who bought a car, yet blithely forgive a killer who slaughtered their children? It seemed like a glaring blemish if not outright hypocrisy. An Amish carpenter put it bluntly, "Some outsiders think that shunning is barbaric."

How can the forgiving Amish be so judgmental of their own people? I probed that question in dozens of interviews with Amish people since the schoolhouse shooting. The answer lies in a sharp distinction between members and nonmembers and between *forgiveness* and *pardon*. What outsiders see as a breach of integrity makes clear moral sense inside this religious community.

The Amish see a spiritual difference between church members and outsiders. Baptized members fall under the authority of the church; outsiders do not. At baptism, young adults, pledge on their knees to support the regulations of the church for the rest of their lives. This sacred vow before God and the gathered community is ratified in heaven according to Amish belief.

For the Amish *forgiveness* means letting go of grudges and giving up the right to revenge. It is unconditional—offered regardless of whether an offender apologizes or expresses remorse. *Pardon*, on the other hand, requires repentance. Granting forgiveness does not free a wrongdoer from disciplinary consequences, but pardon does.

Amish people believe that evil deeds carry consequences. "Just because there's forgiveness doesn't mean there's no consequences. If the killer had lived, we would have forgiven him, but there would have been consequences," explained a minister. But the agents of justice are different for members and non members. Because they have no jurisdiction over outsiders, the Amish look to the state to punish or pardon non-Amish offenders.

There are also consequences when their own members transgress the moral order of the church—buy a car or marry an outsider. But in this case, the church becomes the agent of justice. In Amish eyes the church is responsible to God to hold members accountable to their baptismal vows. Members who violate church regulations receive ample opportunities to repent. If transgressors confess their errors and accept discipline, they are pardoned and restored to fellowship.

Those who spurn the counsel of the church are excommunicated by a vote of the congregation. Drawing on several New Testament texts, the Amish, shun wayward souls, hoping they will confess their errors and return to the fold. Shunning does not cut off conversation, but it does employ rituals of shaming that prohibit eating with an ex-member, accepting rides in an offender's car, or engaging in business with a transgressor.

In the words of a bishop, “a church without shunning is like a house without doors or walls, where the people just walk in and out as they please.” Shunning is tough love for backsliders. An Amish mother compared shunning with spanking. “They go side by side. We love our children. When spanking, we don't get angry at them, and the same is true for shunning.” For the Amish, healthy churches, like good parents, should mete out discipline with love.

An Amish leader explained, “when we see wrong in the world, we can't judge that. We leave it up to God to judge. But since God ordained the church to watch over Christians, we have to judge [our own members] out of concern for their souls.”

Nonetheless, are ex-members forgiven? An elder gave a qualified yes. “Ex-members can and should be forgiven, though we often fall short of that ideal.” Another Amish leader put it this way: “People who are shunned feel like they are not forgiven, but we do forgive them. We try to forgive those that leave. We don't hold a grudge against them. Shunning just reminds them where they stand.”

The Amish believe they have a religious duty to forgive those who wrong them, but they also think the church is responsible to remind its members of the eternal consequences of breaking their baptismal vows. These beliefs clarify the puzzling tie between forgiveness and shunning and show how a people who can instantly forgive killers can conscientiously shun their own ex-members who drive cars and marry outsiders.

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