

Testimony

John A. Miller Tells His Story

Born Again: 37 Years of Darkness Among the Amish



I was born in western Pennsylvania in the small village of Atlantic. Ours was a typical Amish family. We attended church services every other Sunday, which was normal for most Amish. Some of my earliest memories include hearing my grandfather preaching from Romans 8:15,

“For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.”

Other scriptures I heard were John 3:7,

“Ye must be born again,” and John 14:6, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.”*

The Hypocrite

The Amish preach a mixed message of both works and grace, and the need for continual repentance. Unfortunately, the idea that is conveyed is – if we put enough effort into it, we can live sinless lives. As a result, I often felt condemned for I knew I was a sinner. I could not understand why everyone else could be right with God as a result of what they were doing, and here I was, a hypocrite, just pretending to be good.

Breaking the Rules with My Friend

When I was 16 years old, I started what the Amish call, “Rumschpringah.” This means you’re now permitted to spend time with the other Amish youth, instead of just your family. My friends and I did many things against the church rules and against our parents’ wishes. Living this way made for an unhappy life and many a Monday morning saw a depressed young man wondering why life is so empty and meaningless.

Hoping to do Better – Submitting to the Rules

In the spring of 1986, I made a commitment to God and the Amish church to give up my sinful life and to live within the ordinances of the church. It is a solemn occasion on the one day of the year, when young people can join an instruction class mandatory for church membership. They are expected to conform to the rules of the church and to shun the ways of the world in dress and manner of life. Most Amish have very strict rules regarding appearance and any deviation from these rules is enough to keep one from being accepted in fellowship.

One of the hardest things for young Amish youth to do, is to submit themselves to the church and obey the ordinances. Because they are taught that to obey the church rules is to obey God, they believe that when they are baptized into the fellowship, they are now born again.

Because the way of salvation is linked to church membership, there is lots of admonition and teaching given to compel young folks in their late teens to become members. A generally held belief among the Amish is that if you are old enough to be a member and you are not in fellowship, there’s a good chance you are going to hell.

Baptized but Empty

After taking instruction on church rules during the summer months, everyone in our class was baptized by sprinkling. We were told that now we are clean and new, ready for heaven. I remember having expectations of being happy and sinless, of being filled with joy. All I felt was emptiness. I understood that nothing had changed and I did not have peace with God. I was sure it was because I had not tried hard enough to live a good life, and God knew I was still a sinner at heart.

Guilty Conscience

Even after we were church members, my friends and I would continue to do some of the things that were forbidden by the church, including going to bars and attending drinking parties. This brought the added problem of hiding our activities from older church members.

The Amish have communion services twice a year. Members are admonished to make things right with God, so that they would not come under condemnation for partaking of the bread and the wine in an unworthy manner. So, although we seldom got caught, our guilty consciences would move us to confess our sins before the whole congregation.

Becoming the Family Man

At an Amish wedding, I met Miss Delagrange, a nice, quiet young lady, who ended up becoming my wife. We were married on February 4, 1988. As our family grew, Mary and I wanted something better for our children than the way I grew up. So, in the fall of 1999 we moved our family to Potter County in northern Pennsylvania. This was a young Amish community with only nine other families at the time we moved in. We were hoping that because of the slightly different rules and so few other families, our children would not be subjected to the evil influences that are common among some of the Amish.

Terrified Over the Possibility of Eternal Damnation

The years were swiftly passing by; our boys were growing up – yet one thing had not changed. I still realized there was a barrier between me and God and wondered if there was a way for me to be right with Him. If there was, I certainly had not found it. Thinking about hell, eternity and the lake of fire terrified me. I knew Christ was coming back, and in my mind, I would try to devise a way to hide on the Day of Judgment.

The Lady Who Talked About the Lord Jesus Christ

Most of our children were born at home, and soon after moving to Ulysses, we started looking for a midwife. Friends of ours introduced us to Mrs. Barbara Hawley, a kind and gentle lady. However, it was not long before I discovered she liked to talk about spiritual matters, and about the Lord Jesus Christ. This made me uncomfortable for several reasons. I was afraid she would ask me what we believed, and why. I was not sure of either, except if we are good enough we get to go to heaven, although I knew I was not good.

“They had something I did not possess.”

Soon after our son Daniel was born, the Hawleys opened a natural health clinic a short distance from our house. As I got to know the family better, I recognized they had something I did not possess – peace with God. Whether it was real or imagined, I did not know, but it was more than I could ever claim. They would talk to me about Jesus, and how we needed to be saved.

As Amish, we did not believe a person could *know* they were saved. We thought that was something God decided at the time we died. I was very hesitant to talk about this, for we were taught to stay away from people who said they were saved. One day I took the opportunity to ask Art Hawley, Barbara’s husband, whether being born again and being saved were one and the same. He assured me it was, which was a help to me, for the Amish would preach the need to be born again.

Listening to Ruth Hanna Singing Hymns

Most Amish will hire locals to drive them to town for appointments, shopping and other errands that cannot be accomplished by horse and buggy. The Hawleys would give us rides to town or wherever else we needed to go. They had CDs recorded by Ruth Hanna and would often play them for us. Listening to Ruth Hanna’s songs about the Lord Jesus, and salvation through faith in Him, were compelling and thought-provoking. Often they would take opportunity to witness to us about the Lord Jesus Christ and how we are justified by faith alone. Because of what the Amish taught, I could not accept the Gospel, yet I was not certain they were wrong, for my Amish faith had not brought peace with God.

I started doing some part-time work at the clinic for the Hawleys. Mrs. Hawley would often bring my attention to Scripture verses hanging on the walls of the clinic. Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 5:1 were two, in particular, that I

simply could not understand. Being right with God on the basis of what someone else [the Lord Jesus] had done was a concept foreign to my upbringing.

The Real Eye Opener

Sometime during this period, Barbara gave me a KJV New Testament. I was hesitant to take it, for we only read the Martin Luther translation of the German Bible. We were taught that the 'English' version was misleading. Most Amish can't read German fluently, and don't understand much of the Scriptures.

Reading my new Bible was a real eye-opener for me. Art suggested I read in the Gospel of John, which I did, but I found Romans fascinating. A light bulb went on when I read Romans 9:31, 32, 33. It was easy to make the comparison between Israel and the Amish. It was made clear to me why I had *no* peace with God by keeping the church rules. My condemnation before a Holy God was made obvious. I'll never forget the first time I read:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 6:23

At last I knew, without a doubt, what my wages were. The last part of the verse eluded me. I still thought that somehow, I had to pay God for my sins.

Facing Hell Forever

Finally, it became evident to me, because of my sins, I would not be in heaven and I was going to be in hell forever. I rebelled against God for creating me just to suffer eternal torment. I remember taking care of the daily chores on the farm and thinking these poor creatures are better off than I – for upon death they will simply cease to exist. I, on the other hand, would be cast into hell and suffer for all eternity.

Those were hard days for me, but I thank God for them. He was bringing me to true repentance and to the provision of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Day Things Changed

One nice September evening in the year 2005, I was working at the clinic, helping Barbara apply a finish on a porch floor. We were discussing spiritual issues again, which, by now, were not distasteful to me. She asked me what I thought would get me to heaven and I answered as I had been taught all my life: that if you're faithful to confess all your sins to God, and are sincere, He will let you into heaven. This prompted her to ask me, "*John, if you committed a sin and before you could ask forgiveness Christ came back, would you go to hell?*"

All those months of anxiety, of praying for God to show me what was truth, the knowledge that I was not right with God, and those Bible verses which told of righteousness through faith in Christ alone came back to me. I realized I needed to make a choice, and it seemed to me that if I did not trust in the Lord Jesus now, I would be lost forever. At that moment, I put my faith in Him, and replied, "*No! I'd go to heaven!*"

Instantly I knew something had changed. I sat back on my heels for a moment and tried to figure out exactly what was different. I thought perhaps I had done something wrong. Yet somehow, I knew it could not be true. I felt something new that I had never experienced before. Without completely understanding what had happened, I had peace with my Creator. I was saved, even though it was a while before I realized it was simply trust in the Lord Jesus, that had changed my life forever that night. And though I could not have told you I was saved, I no longer felt under the condemnation of God.

I Know for Sure I Will be in Heaven

It was not long before I was telling my friends among the Amish that we could be sure of being in heaven because we're not made right by our works, but by what Jesus had done for us.

Amazing Grace and Mercy

Looking back, I marvel once again at God's amazing grace and mercy. I was 37 years old when He reached down into my darkened world and set me free. The peace that I now have with God through my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is worth more to me than anything the world or any religion has to offer. To know that I shall be in heaven because God so loved the world that He gave His only Son to die on the cross for an undeserving guilty sinner like me, still brings tears to my eyes.

What love! What boundless grace is given to men and women! The Bible reveals that all have sinned and come short of God's glorious standard, but He has made a way for us to be right with Him by the giving of His Son for our sins. To think that some will never accept justification by faith in Christ alone, but depend on a creed, a religion, or something they have done, is the tragedy of the universe.

What About You? Are You Ready?

Oh sinner, make haste! Confess your helplessness before the Almighty God. Accept the Savior's finished work on the cross for your sins while there is yet time. Do not tarry. You do not know if you can repent tomorrow. Your opportunity for salvation has a most uncertain element: time, which is fleeing swiftly even as we ponder. Make things right with your Creator now. He will give you new life; you will become a child of God. You will have a peace that will pass all understanding.

Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life: no man comes unto the Father except by Me." John 14:6
Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation and you too, will be sure of spending eternity in heaven.

