



The Awakening!

Volume 4 Issue 1

Chronicling the Anabaptist Rediscovery of their Special Spiritual Heritage

Could This Be Your Final Issue of *The Awakening*?

By David Kirkwood

Greetings to you in 2026! I hope this issue of *The Awakening!* finds you loving God and others by the power of the Holy Spirit (who indwells everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ)!

When we first began publishing *The Awakening!* in 2023, our intention was, and always has been, to help Amish people rediscover the faith of their forefathers, the original Anabaptists, who all experienced the wonderful new birth that is available to all by God's grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are happy to report that is exactly what has happened all over the United States. We have many letters from Amish readers who have been born again as a result of reading *The Awakening!* and believing the gospel for the very first time in their lives. Included in this issue are the uplifting testimonies of six such Amish people. And there are many more such stories that we could publish.

On the other hand, we have received several thousand letters from Amish people who have requested to be removed from our mailing list. Most of those letters are respectful, but some are very nasty. Worse, we sometimes hear reports of Amish bishops and ministers who tell their church members to not read *The Awakening!* or to burn it when it arrives. (Yet we hear no reports of any Amish bishop or minister actually refuting, from a biblical standpoint, what has been written in *The Awakening!*)

Tragically, so many Amish people are not interested in following Jesus, but prefer to follow manmade and unbiblical traditions. Worse, they are hoping for the impossible—that by keeping those traditions they can somehow secure a place in heaven, an idea that the New Testament repeatedly condemns. We have, however, done our best to proclaim only biblical truth, even though it may challenge long-held traditions. Our consciences are clear. Salvation is by grace through faith, and not as result of works, but it always results in works (see Eph. 2:8-10).

All that is to say, over the past few months, we've debated if we should continue publishing *The Awakening!*

Each issue requires tens of thousands of dollars for printing and mailing tens of thousands of copies. Although we receive donations from grateful Amish readers, it hasn't been enough to sustain publication without outside help. So we are wondering if, by continuing to publish, we are trying to "milk a dead cow." Is it time for us to be thankful for those whose hearts have been open but, as Jesus said, "Leave the dead to bury the dead"?

Being undecided, we've decided to ask our readers what they think we should do. We are asking those who want to continue receiving *The Awakening!* to simply write and tell us. If we receive enough positive responses, we will. If not, we will stop publishing. (If you do not want to continue receiving *The Awakening!*, there is no need to write and tell us.)

We need to hear from you within the next four weeks. Our mailing address can be found on the final page of this issue. Or you can simply call Jonas at (814) 952-7758.

In this issue of *The Awakening!*, we've included two more chapters from my book, *Why Be Plain? A Biblical Response*, that I think you will find very interesting.

In those two chapters, we take a close look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and ask the simple question: "Was Jesus raising the moral standard found in the Law of Moses, or was He correcting the Pharisees' twisted interpretation of the Law of Moses?"

We've also include a great article written by Jonas about Pinecraft, Florida, a warm winter haven for Amish folks. It's not just snow and cold winds, however, that Pinecraft Amish folks are escaping. Jonas has some excellent insights to share.

Jonas also recently visited an awakening that is spreading among the Amish in upstate New York. More than 40 Amish adults have been born again in the last year, and their lives are being transformed. Jonas shares some of their encouraging stories in his article titled, "An Awakening Amidst a War." Read it and rejoice!

Finally, don't forget to write to us soon if you want to continue receiving *The Awakening!* Thank you! Be blessed as you read! David

What Is Really Happening in Pinecraft?

By Jonas Kurtz

If an average American tourist happens through Pinecraft, Florida during the winter months, he may be up for quite the surprise. The middle of the city suddenly turns into a Plain paradise. Sidewalks and crosswalks are teeming with e-bikes and golf carts, ridden by Amish men and women who have journeyed there for vacation.

These folks come from across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and beyond, traveling to Sarasota to escape the winter cold of the North and enjoy some fun in the sun. But is escaping the cold really what they are after?

About five years ago when we were still Amish, my wife and I had the opportunity to spend a little time in Pinecraft. We were only there for less than a day, but even in that short visit we were surprised

by what we saw—and by what we have learned since.

I recently saw a cartoon that showed an airplane full of Amish people leaving the airport with the caption, "En route to Sarasota." The next image showed a crowd of people who had been left behind. The caption under it said, "Church Rules." It was humorous, but it made an obvious point. Many Amish folks who vacation in Pinecraft—and elsewhere—do not follow the rules of their church while they are away from home. Amish folks from communities where even unpowered bicycles are forbidden spend their vacation riding e-bikes, wearing non-Amish clothing, and staying in cottages often owned by themselves or other wealthy Amish families. Those cottages have electricity, television, air conditioning, and nearly every modern convenience, much of which is forbidden back home.

Some Amish visitors to Pinecraft not only engage in what is forbidden in their church, but also in what is forbidden in the Bible—gambling, drinking, partying on the beach, and dressing in ways that even the surrounding "world" would recognize as immodest. All of this seems to suddenly become acceptable because they are hundreds of miles from home and close to sand and water. It is no wonder that Pinecraft has often been labeled as "Amish Vegas."

Now let me be clear on the topic of transgressing the ordnung. I am not personally offended that Amish folks on vacation do not follow their church rules while they are away. If you have read any past issues of *The Awakening!* you should know that we do not believe such rules are of importance, nor are they what bring a person closer to God. But the fact that those on vacation are quick to do what would be forbidden at home does make an interesting point.

Over the last three years of publishing *The Awakening!*, we have received thousands of letters and phone calls from our readers. A large percentage of them have contacted us to defend the extra-biblical rules of Plain ordnungs with the justification that they help Plain people obey and stay closer to God. They often tell us that they are "keeping the ordnung rules for God."

But when they follow ordnung rules at home and abandon them when away, they reveal their true heart's motivation. It isn't love for God. Rather, it is gaining the acceptance of others.

If those rules were truly being kept for God, they would still matter when no one from home was watching. But when rules exist mainly because of community pressure, they can be discarded as soon as that pressure is removed.

For this reason, I suspect that Pinecraft—and vacation destinations beyond it—feel like freedom to many. For me, that was certainly true. Even though I came from a relatively liberal community with few formal rules, it was still freeing to get away and be my authentic self for a few days before the inevitable return to my box. If that resonates with you, keep reading, I have good news for you!

I believe many of those traveling to Sarasota and living temporarily outside their rules are expressing a deeper longing. Not always a conscious desire for freedom from rules, but freedom from the brokenness of life as they know it. Freedom from brokenness, depression, darkness, frustration, and shame. For a short time, they can pretend to be someone else and experience life differently.

And perhaps some folks who go there for weeks or months on end are struggling with purpose. Perhaps they have done well in terms of earthly wealth, but something seems to be missing. They have not been called into ministry according to the custom of their church so their purpose is not serving the Lord, but there is something lacking in life. At one time, going on vacation to escape their day to day life filled that void, but more and more as they get older they feel like they are missing something. There must be more to life than this.

If you have ever read the book of Ecclesiastes, you know that Solomon, a man who had all the wealth, power and pleasure anyone could desire, also struggled with purpose. Repeatedly throughout the book he says "vanity vanity, everything is vanity." Here are a few excerpts from chapter 2:4-11 "I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself....I gathered for myself silver and

gold...I kept my heart from no pleasure....then I considered all my hands had done....and behold, all was vanity and chasing after wind."

Like so many others since him, Solomon tried everything under the sun to find purpose, but he said all of it was like "chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes, 2:17). All if it left him empty and wondering at the purpose of life! But fortunately, Solomon figured it out and at the end of his book he writes this. "The end of the matter; all has been heard, Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecclesiastes, 12:13)

And this is where the good news comes in. Solomon "figured it out" and so can you!

The freedom and purpose you are reaching for—the freedom that feels so temporary and fleeting—does not have to end when vacation is over. It can be yours permanently. True freedom and purpose is not found in geography, distance, or secrecy. It is found in being born again and made new in Christ! If you will turn from your attempts at finding purpose, meaning, or pleasure through other avenues and simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will find the peace and purpose you have been searching for!

Galatians 5:1 tells us, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Jesus did not come to offer a brief escape from pressure; He came to break chains. The chains of fear, shame, lack of purpose, brokenness and pretending. The chains of always trying to be good enough, but always falling short.

And of course we are not being set free *to* sin, but rather we are set free *from* sin! No longer are we under guilt or condemnation for all the sin we have committed, rather we know that Jesus has cleared our record and we will inherit eternal life. Because of this we want to walk after him, and not after our previous sins.

We are also set free from the meaningless of life, recognizing that we now have purpose in God's kingdom as we are "Ambassadors for Christ." (see 2 Corinthians 5:20.) As believers, we all have a purpose

in the work of the Kingdom, not just those who are "ordained." When Jesus is our Lord then our sole purpose becomes glorifying and serving him. When we do this we no longer feel empty, broken, or lost. Life no longer feels like it lacks purpose because we are doing what we were created to do, walk in union with God!

You do not need to live a double life. You do not need to be one person at home and another on vacation. In Christ, you can live in truth, freedom, and grace—everywhere, all the time. And that freedom does not fade when you return home. When you have been born again, and you know your sins have been forgiven you will know that you don't need to "measure up" to those around you. In fact Jesus said you will not "measure up" but you will rather be persecuted by them. But persecution is easy to bear when we know we have been born again and our name is written in the lambs book of life!

P.S. I am of course not opposed at all to taking vacations. My wife and I along with our children periodically go on vacation. In fact, our Lord at times took time to get away for a little bit. I only write this article for those who are searching for freedom in vacation that their life at home can't offer. Keep going on vacation, but find your freedom in Jesus!

A Second Look at The Sermon on The Mount

By David Kirkwood

Note to readers: The following article is taken from chapters 20 and 21 of my book, *Why Be Plain? A Biblical Response*, which was written in response to a book titled, *Why Be Plain?*, authored by Old Order Stauffer Mennonites Weaver and Zimmerman. If you desire to read the entire book, instructions for purchasing a paperback copy of receiving a free electronic copy can be found on the last page of this issue of *The Awakening!*

All Anabaptists generally believe that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduced new laws for the new covenant, laws that uphold a higher moral standard than what is found in the Law of Moses. That premise is based on Jesus' six statements that begin with either "You

have heard that it was said" or "You have heard that the ancients were told" (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Jesus then always mentions a law or teaching derived from the Mosaic Law, followed by a counterpoint that always begins with the words, "But I say to you" (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). For brevity's sake, henceforth I will refer to them as "Jesus' six statements."

Weaver and Zimmerman certainly hold to the common Anabaptist view of Jesus' six statements, as indicated by two paragraphs in chapter 9 of *Why Be Plain?*:

In some of the next Scriptures Jesus says something like, "Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time," meaning it was an Old Testament or Jewish law. Then Jesus says, "But I say unto you," meaning He is now setting forth a new standard for the New Testament Christians. He then proceeds to set a higher and stricter one.

This is something many Christians of today don't understand. They think Jesus came to remove all laws. Yes, Jesus took away the Old Testament sacrificial and sacramental laws, but instead of taking away the law of moral standards, He actually set stricter ones. For example, in the Old Testament it was wrong to commit adultery. Jesus did not take away that law. He set a higher one and said anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has committed adultery! (Matt. 5:27-28) (p. 177).

Twice in the above quotation, Weaver and Zimmerman claim that Jesus set "higher" and "stricter" moral standards. But the example they give raises questions about their claim. They imply that during Old Testament times, adultery was wrong but lust was not. Lust did not become a sin until Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Is that true?

In this chapter, I will not address every subject that Weaver and Zimmerman mention in chapter 9 of *Why Be Plain?* Rather, I will examine—in the light of Scripture—the premise that Jesus introduced higher moral standards in His Sermon on the Mount. Much of Anabaptist theology, including much of what Weaver and Zimmerman advocate, is built on that premise.

A Caution

First, we should not automatically assume that Jesus was altering or upgrading part of the Mosaic Law just because He referenced something from the Mosaic Law and then said, "But I say to you." It is possible that Jesus' disciples had heard something that was incorrect or incomplete, and Jesus was correcting or completing their understanding.

For example, imagine a police officer saying to you, "You have heard that robbing a bank is illegal, but I say to you that stealing anything that belongs to another person is illegal." You would not assume the officer was informing you about recently enacted laws that conveyed a higher moral standard. Rather, you would understand that he was elaborating on the theme of theft, helping you to understand that robbing a bank is not the only example.

Jesus once did that very thing when He was speaking to His disciples. He used the phrase "but I say to you" to communicate to them that their understanding regarding a certain topic was incomplete:

And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; *but I say to you* that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished" (Matt. 17:10–12, emphasis added).

Jesus fully affirmed the truth of what His disciples had heard from the scribes about the coming of Elijah, but He then revealed something the scribes had missed, namely that Malachi's prophecy that God would send "Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5) was partially fulfilled by the ministry of John the Baptist. So, in this case, "But I say to you" meant, "Your understanding is partial, so let me tell you more."

As we read Jesus' six statements, we should not rule out the possibility that He was, in fact, *not* introducing new laws with higher standards but, rather, correcting their misunderstanding of old laws found in the Mosaic Law. And that is

especially likely since Jesus introduced all six of His statements with these words:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, *not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law* until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17–20, emphasis added).

Although those introductory words don't preclude the possibility that Jesus established standards that *exceeded* those found in the Law and Prophets, they do preclude the possibility that Jesus' six statements might *contradict* the Law of Moses or any of the Prophets. To *contradict* what is found in the Law and Prophets is equivalent to *abolishing* what Jesus said He would not abolish.

Beyond that, if Jesus contradicted anything found in the Law and Prophets, He contradicted Himself, as He, being God, was the divine author behind both. Additionally, for God to contradict Himself or change His view on fundamental moral principles would require a change in God's essential character, which is impossible.

As an illustration, imagine someone suggesting that during the old covenant, God wanted His people to always tell the truth, but that under the new covenant, He expects them to tell the truth only when they swear on a Bible. In all other instances, lying is acceptable. Such a suggestion would obviously amount to a divine moral downgrade. Of course, no one would accept such a suggestion as valid, as it would imply a fundamental moral character change in God Himself. God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Thus lying (particularly when used to gain advantage over or harm someone) cannot be morally acceptable to Him, ever.

The same would be true if anyone suggested a reversal of the above example, such as teaching that under the old covenant God expected His people to tell the truth only when they swore on the Bible, but that under the new covenant, He expects them to always tell the truth, which would be a divine moral *upgrade*. Such a teaching would imply that, at one time, some lying was acceptable to God, which would in turn imply that God Himself has undergone moral improvement such that lying, unlike previously, is now always unacceptable to Him. For the same reason that we would reject the suggestion of a divine moral downgrade, we should also reject the suggestion of a divine moral upgrade.

As we consider Jesus' six statements with these thoughts in mind—thoughts based on what is revealed in the *entirety* of Scripture—we are better able to correctly interpret them. We should be highly suspicious of any interpretation according to which Jesus altered fundamental morality, effectively pitting Himself against the Mosaic Law, His Father, and Himself.

Regarding each of the six statements, we will ask two questions.

First, when Jesus referenced something from the Law of Moses, did He accurately quote a specific commandment, or was He referencing what the scribes and Pharisees taught? In none of the six cases do we find Jesus saying, "The Law of Moses says" Rather, He says, "You have heard" So what His audience had heard may or may not have been an accurate reflection of what was taught in the Mosaic Law. And if Jesus was raising the standard, we would expect that He would correctly reference the old standard before revealing the contrasting new standard.

The second question we will ask concerning each of Jesus' six statements is this: Was the alleged "new standard" Jesus introduced actually a standard that cannot be found in the Mosaic Law? If a standard Jesus advocated *can* be found in the Mosaic Law, then it was not a new standard.

Jesus' First Statement

Let's begin with the first of Jesus' six statements:

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, “You good-for-nothing,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matt. 5:21–24).

Did Jesus accurately cite the Law of Moses?

Yes and no. “You shall not commit murder” is found in the Ten Commandments, but “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court” is not found anywhere in the Mosaic Law. It must have been something Jesus’ audience heard from the scribes and Pharisees, and in light of Jesus’ counterpoint, their teaching seems to have focused only on deterring murder while ignoring those things that lead to murder and that are, in themselves, lesser forms of murder. Jesus contrasted the appraisal of a human court with the appraisal of God’s court, a much stricter court that sometimes sentences the guilty to hell.

Was the standard Jesus prescribed a new standard that cannot be found in the Mosaic Law?

Consider the fact that no honest person would ever think God’s original prohibition against murder, found in the Mosaic Law, was a divine allowance to strangle someone—provided that the strangler released his chokehold just in time for his victim to gasp for air and barely survive. And if that chain of logic is traced to its logical beginning, we realize God’s prohibition of murder included a prohibition of the anger and hatred that can lead to murder, as well as venomous words that often precede murder. God doesn’t want anyone in the “murder groove.” His original prohibition against murder was also a prohibition of hatred.

Moreover, God has *never* wanted anyone to be in the murder groove, because He has not changed and neither have His fundamental moral standards. There was never a time prior to the Sermon on the Mount when God would have approved of an Israelite bringing an offering to the temple who had a broken relationship that could be repaired. The second-greatest commandment was to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18), so it obviously superseded any obligation regarding temple offerings.

To claim that Jesus was raising the standard in Matthew 5:21–24 is to claim that the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself is not found in the Mosaic Law, and that during the old covenant, hating one’s neighbor, and spewing hateful words at one’s neighbor were acceptable to God. We can specifically read in the Law of Moses, “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him” (Lev. 19:17). Under the old covenant, God forbade hatred in the heart.

It is therefore safe to conclude that Jesus was not, in His first of six statements, raising the moral standard. He was simply elaborating on the existing standard that was not only evident in the Mosaic Law, but in every human conscience.

Jesus’ Second Statement

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell (Matt. 5:27–30).

Did Jesus accurately cite the Mosaic Law’s standard?

Yes. However, as with the first statement, He elaborated on the implications of that standard.

No one would ever think that God’s prohibition against adultery was a divine allowance to engage in a sexual relationship with your neighbor’s wife, just as long as it didn’t go as far as intercourse. And if we trace that logic to its beginning, it is obvious that God’s prohibition of adultery included a prohibition of what always precedes adultery, namely lust.

God does not want anyone in the “adultery groove,” and He has *never* wanted anyone in that groove, because He has not changed and neither have His fundamental moral standards. There was never a time prior to the Sermon on the Mount when God would have approved of an Israelite man lusting after another man’s wife, committing adultery in his heart. In fact, lust was prohibited in the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Ex. 20:17).

Moreover, Job, who most likely lived long before the Mosaic Law but who had a God-given conscience, said, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?” (Job 31:1). Lust has always been a sin.

Lust, like murder, is also a violation of the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself, a commandment found in the Mosaic Law. Therefore, lust was a sin under the old covenant.

To claim that Jesus was raising the standard in Matthew 5:27–30 is to claim that lust was acceptable to God under the Mosaic Law, which is absurd. He was not introducing a new, higher moral standard in this case.

Jesus’ Third Statement

It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce”; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:31–32).

Of course, the topic of divorce and remarriage is hotly debated within Christian circles. But my purpose in this chapter is to determine whether the standards Jesus set in His six statements were a moral upgrade to the Mosaic Law. So we will stick with our two questions.

Chronicling the Anabaptist Rediscovery of their Special Spiritual Heritage

Did Jesus accurately cite the Law of Moses?

No. "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce" cannot be found anywhere in the Mosaic Law, although it is likely derived from Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus' counterpoint leads us to think that He was actually citing the lax teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, who apparently emphasized the importance of divorce certificates while ignoring the sin of illegitimate divorce.

We know that many, if not the majority, of Pharisees in Jesus' time believed that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all, as indicated by their questioning Jesus over that very issue (see Matt. 19:3), as well as by the historical evidence for the rabbinic debate at the time regarding what constituted an "indecent" for which the Mosaic Law apparently allowed divorce (see Deut. 24:1-4).

Was the standard Jesus prescribed a new standard?

If we conclude that it was, we must assume that Jesus' decree, "Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery," would *not* have been true under the Law of Moses. That would mean that under the old covenant, God allegedly found no fault with the man who divorced his wife for reasons other than unchastity, and that such a man was not guilty of making his ex-wife "commit adultery" when she remarried.

We know that under the Mosaic Law, God did find fault with the man who divorced his wife for reasons other than unchastity. We read in Malachi:

"This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who

has a remnant of the Spirit. ... Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (Mal. 2:13-16).

In this case, God referred to divorce as "treachery" because Israelite men were breaking their marriage vows when they divorced "the wives of their youth," apparently to marry younger women. To claim that Jesus was establishing a new, higher standard, now making divorce lawful only for unchastity, whereas it was formerly lawful for any reason is to claim that God did not speak through the prophet Malachi.

In short, Jesus was not establishing a new standard regarding lawful divorce; rather, He was elaborating on the existing standard established in the Mosaic Law (not to mention the law of conscience). This is further proved by the fact that in every other instance when Jesus equated divorce and remarriage to adultery, He clearly had the Law of Moses in view, just as in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5:17-20).

For example, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the lawfulness of divorcing one's wife for any cause (Matt. 19:3-9), they were asking whether, *according to the Mosaic Law*, it was lawful to divorce for any cause. They even cited the Mosaic Law's provision for divorce in their later argument. The entire conversation was framed within the Mosaic Law, and it took place during the era of the old covenant when the Mosaic Law was still in force. When Jesus said to them, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery," none of them thought to themselves that He was establishing a new, higher standard. Rather, they all naturally assumed He was elaborating on the true standard of the Mosaic Law.

This is perhaps even more obvious in Luke's record of one of the incidents when Jesus equated divorce and remarriage to adultery:

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for *one stroke of a letter of the Law* to fail. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery (Luke 16:16-18, emphasis added).

Clearly, the third sentence in that passage illustrates the concept presented in the first two sentences. Prior to John's preaching the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand, anyone who preached in Israel was preaching from the Law and Prophets. John, however, had an exciting new message that became very popular, so much so that it overshadowed the Law and Prophets in many people's minds, making them irrelevant. Jesus experienced the same misconception regarding His own preaching (Matt. 5:17).

However, Jesus strongly condemned such a view, saying that in spite of what anyone might think, it was easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail. The Law and Prophets were still *very* relevant. Adultery was still a sin. So was breaking a marriage covenant. Thus, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery."

This is one more proof that Jesus' third statement in the Sermon on the Mount did not mark the establishment of a new, upgraded moral standard but simply elaborated on the old standard found in the Law of Moses.

Jesus' Fourth Statement

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your state-

ment be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil” (Matt. 5:33–37).

Did Jesus accurately cite what the Mosaic Law had to say about making false vows?

Yes. Although He may not have quoted it verbatim, He certainly expressed the spirit of the Mosaic Law regarding vows (see Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21, 23). God expected the people of Israel to keep their vows.

Was Jesus establishing a new standard that can't be found in the Mosaic Law?

Some say yes because of Jesus' words, “But I say to you, make no oath at all.” And if that was what Jesus said, that would be a new and different standard. However, that is *not* what Jesus said. He said:

But I say to you, make no oath at all, *either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.* Nor shall you make an oath *by your head*, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil.

Jesus was not forbidding the making of vows and oaths, which are nothing more than promises or declarations of what one will do. What could be evil about that? In fact, saying “Yes, yes” is a vow.

Was Paul sinning when he wrote to the Corinthians, “I will come to you after I go through Macedonia. ... But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Cor. 16:5, 8)? Was he sinning when he promised Philemon that he would repay any debts incurred by his new convert, Onesimus (Philem. 18–19)? Are marriage vows displeasing to God? Are salvation vows by which a repentant sinner tells God he is turning from his sin forbidden?

No, Jesus was clearly forbidding the practice of making oaths by swearing by something, such as heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one's head. That was the common practice of the scribes and Pharisees, as revealed by Jesus' own words about them recorded in Matthew 23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.” You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, “Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.” You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it” (Matt. 23:15–22).

Pathetically, Israel's spiritual leaders had concocted a method that made lying lawful. One only needed to know the pharisaic intricacies of the rules governing the swearing of oaths.

So again, in this fourth statement, was Jesus establishing a new and higher standard?

Such a claim would imply that under the Mosaic Law, lying was sometimes acceptable to God—which would contradict not only the Ninth Commandment but scores of other scriptures that clearly establish God's expectation for truthfulness. Numbers 30:2 would have to be interpreted to actually mean, “If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth, *except when he does so by swearing on the temple, the altar, or heaven. In those cases, lying is acceptable.*”

Moreover, although Revelation 21:8 says that all liars will be cast into the lake of fire, if you were a liar under the Law of Moses, you would be lucky that God's standard was different back then! Additionally, the guilt felt in the consciences of every person who lied prior to the Sermon on the Mount would actually be false guilt that had no origin in God.

The Fifth Statement

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you (Matt. 5:38–42).

Did Jesus accurately cite the Mosaic Law?

Yes, the words “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” are found three times in the Mosaic Law (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21).

Was Jesus' counterpoint a moral upgrade?

At first glance, one might think so. Note, however, that in each instance where the phrase “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is found in the Mosaic Law, it is contained within instructions related to Israel's *civil* law. More specifically, they are found within instructions that regulated Israel's court system. God expected Israel's judges to administer justice.

The most obvious example of this is found in Deuteronomy 19. In the passage quoted below, I have italicized sections that verify the judicatory context:

A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand

Chronicling the Anabaptist Rediscovery of their Special Spiritual Heritage

for hand, foot for foot (Deut. 19:15–21, emphasis added).

In none of the three places when “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is found in the Mosaic Law could it be rightly interpreted as a command for *individual* Israelites to take personal revenge for offenses committed against them. In fact, the Mosaic Law clearly forbade taking any personal revenge (which is one reason God established a court system in Israel):

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord (Lev. 19:18).

Vengeance is Mine, and retribution (Deut. 32:35).

To recap, Jesus first quoted a civil statute from the Mosaic Law that charged court judges to administer justice, a statute that specifically referenced *non-trivial* offenses (“life for life, eye for eye”). Within that same Mosaic Law was a prohibition against individual Israelites taking personal revenge, so there is no way that the “eye for an eye” passages could be viewed as instructions for individual Israelites to take personal revenge. Then Jesus told His followers not to take revenge for offenses that were *trivial* by comparison to those listed in the “eye for an eye” passages. Moreover, He told them to offer their petty offenders an opportunity to do twice the harm they intended.

So we have a choice of interpretations. First, we could conclude that Jesus did not know that the “eye for an eye” instructions in the Mosaic Law had no application to His followers outside of Israel’s civil law, and that He was unaware that the same Law forbade His followers from taking personal revenge. We could assume that because of His ignorance regarding these matters, He thought it was time to correct the low moral standard of the Mosaic Law (of which He was the divine author). So, in a grand, divine moral flip-flop, He abolished the alleged law that required individual Israelites to take personal revenge for major offenses, and from the Sermon on the Mount onward, He would expect His followers never to do what the Mosaic Law allegedly re-

quired them to do, taking no revenge not even for petty offenses.

Or we can conclude that Jesus was alluding to the perverse teaching of the scribes and Pharisees—just as He had done in his previous four statements, in which he corrected their twisted teaching—in that they misapplied the “eye for an eye” passages in the Mosaic Law to justify revenge even for petty offenses. We might also conclude that Jesus was affirming that whereas Israel’s divinely established court system was designed for non-trivial offenses (such as murder and maiming), God expected trivial offenses such as cheek-slapping to be met with mercy that shames the offender.

The second of those two interpretations would seem most plausible, especially in light of the fact that the concept of mercy-shaming one’s offenders is an Old Testament ethic:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
You will heap burning coals on his head,
And the Lord will reward you (Prov. 25:21–22).

Mercy-shaming one’s enemies is also contained in the Mosaic Law:

If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him; you shall surely release it with him (Ex. 23:4–5).

Honest readers of this passage who lived under the Mosaic Law would extrapolate the moral principle there and find application to other situations where they might “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Pity the pathetic Israelite who saw his enemy’s *horse* lying helpless under its load and said to himself, “I’m glad that isn’t a donkey, or I’d have to do something.”

In summary, the claim that Jesus was introducing, in His fifth statement, a moral upgrade to the Mosaic Law is simply not true. Jesus was only correcting the per-

verse twisting of the Mosaic Law by the scribes and Pharisees while affirming the ethic found in the Law.

By the way, Paul would agree that the ethics of not taking revenge and mercy-shaming one’s offenders have not changed from the old to the new covenant. Here are his own words to new covenant believers:

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. But “if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:19–21).

In that passage, Paul quoted twice from the Old Testament (Deut. 32:35; Prov. 25:21–22), showing that he believed that the new covenant ethic was identical to the old covenant ethic. There was no upgrade. In His fifth statement, Jesus was not introducing a higher ethic.

The Sixth Statement

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:43–48).

Did Jesus accurately cite the Law of Moses?

Yes and no. If your New Testament translation capitalizes Old Testament quotations, Matthew 5:43 looks like this: “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.” The Mosaic Law certainly instructed the Israelites to love their neighbors, but it did not instruct

them to hate their enemies. In fact, as we have already seen, it instructed them to love their enemies in certain situations, shaming their enemies by showing them underserved mercy and returning good for evil.

So once again, Jesus was citing not the Mosaic Law but what His audience had heard from their teachers, the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' counterpoint seems to indicate not only that the scribes and Pharisees taught their students to hate their enemies, but that their "neighbors" whom the Law commanded them to love were only those people who loved them.

Clearly, Jesus was not establishing a higher moral standard but affirming the old standard—a standard that God not only revealed in the Mosaic Law but has always been teaching all the earth's inhabitants through His own example. Long before the giving of the Mosaic Law, God had been causing His sun to rise on the evil and good and sending crop-growing rain on the righteous and unrighteous, two examples of loving His enemies. This natural revelation is yet another reason why it is absurd to claim that loving one's enemies is a new, higher moral standard introduced by Jesus. God has expected people to love their enemies from the very beginning, and He included that standard in the Mosaic Law.

New Covenant Sins That Were Not Old Covenant Sins?

To claim that Jesus was introducing new, higher moral standards in these six statements is to claim that prior to the Sermon on the Mount, all of the following were acceptable to God: (1) spewing venomous, hateful words against one's brothers; (2) elevating ceremonial laws above moral laws, as exemplified by the act of presenting a sacrifice at the altar even when one knew he had a broken relationship; (3) lustfully looking at another man's wife; (4) divorce for any reason, as long as one gave his wife a divorce certificate; (5) lying; (6) taking personal revenge for even minor offenses; and (7) hating those who have caused offense.

A cursory reading of the Mosaic Law should show the grave error of such a conclusion. All seven items in my list above would be violations of God's

commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself, an old covenant law. Thus, none of them would have been acceptable to God even prior to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In other words, *Jesus could not have been introducing new, higher moral standards.*

Beyond this, one would expect—if Jesus did morally upgrade the Mosaic Law—that the apostolic authors of the New Testament epistles would have mentioned such an important theological and moral fact. However, not only do they *never* mention it, but they actually refute it, affirming old covenant ethic premises—just as they were originally written—as binding upon their new covenant readers.

For example, I've already cited Romans 12:19-21, in which Paul quoted two Old Testament passages to support his prohibition of revenge and his admonition to love one's enemies. Paul indisputably believed both ethics predated the Sermon on the Mount, and for good reason: because they did!

Another example is the Old Testament commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18), a commandment Jesus referred to as one of the two greatest. It is also the single greatest *social* commandment (law regarding relationships with others) of the old covenant. It was carried over from the Law of Moses to the Law of Christ, as shown by its endorsement by Christ (who told His disciples to teach their disciples all that He commanded them), as well as by its endorsement by the apostles Paul and James in their epistles to new covenant believers. The Old Testament commandment that Jesus said is the second-greatest in the Mosaic Law is superseded by no higher ethic in the new covenant, again conclusively proving that there has been no moral upgrade.

James wrote:

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well (Jas. 2:8).

Here, James referred to the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself as the "royal law," clearly elevating it above all other laws, and he informed his new

covenant readers that they were "doing well" if they were fulfilling it. He did not call on them to keep a higher social or moral standard than what was found in the Mosaic Law.

The apostle Paul similarly believed the new covenant believer who loves his neighbor as himself "does well," as he fulfills all the other social commandments of the Mosaic Law. Paul, like James, did not hold his readers to any higher social or moral standard than what was found in the Mosaic Law. To the Roman Christians he wrote:

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

To the Galatian Christians, Paul similarly wrote:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:13-14).

If Paul or James believed God had radically altered or upgraded the moral ethics revealed in the Mosaic Law (as Anabaptists like Weaver and Zimmerman want us to believe), why did both of them hold up these summary statements contained in the Mosaic Law as the standard their readers should strive to attain? Why did they, along with all the other authors of the New Testament epistles, never mention that the moral standards of the new covenant were higher than those of the old covenant?

To buttress their argument regarding the alleged higher standards of the Sermon on the Mount, some Anabaptists appeal to passages in the New Testament epistles that speak of the passing of the Mosaic Law with the demise of the old covenant and the inauguration of the new cov-

enant. As we have just seen, however, although it can rightly be said that the ceremonial aspects of the Law of Moses are no longer binding, it cannot rightly be said that the moral and social ethics found in the Law of Moses have ceased to be binding, as those ethics predate the Law of Moses (being found in every human conscience) and were clearly carried over into the Law of Christ.

Thus, when we read Anabaptist proof-texts such as Hebrews 7:12, "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there *takes place a change of law also*," we can be sure that the author is speaking of changes in the laws regarding the Levitical priesthood, not laws of fundamental ethics and morality. Under the new covenant, none of the laws that regulated the Levitical priests are relevant, as the Levitical priesthood has ceased. We have a new High Priest after the order of Melchizedek (see Heb. 7).

One Final Argument

But what about the "new commandment" that Christ gave to His apostles, a commandment to love one another, even as He loved them (John 13:34–35)? Was Jesus not establishing a higher ethic with a higher standard than what was found in the Mosaic Law?

"New," of course, does not necessarily mean "superior," "higher," or even "different." It just means "new" as in "not existing before." Up to that point, Jesus had not told any of His followers to love each other as He loved them. He had only told them (through the Mosaic Law) to love their neighbors as themselves and to love their enemies.

But how did Jesus love His disciples? He loved them perfectly according to the standard He had given in the Mosaic Law, loving them as He loved Himself. So Jesus' new commandment was just a rephrasing of an old commandment. Instead of stating, "Love your neighbor as yourself," or "Treat others just as you want to be treated," Jesus said, "Imitate Me." That new commandment was *slightly* different in that it specifically addressed whom His followers should love: not their "neighbors" or "others" but one another.

Jesus repeated the same new commandment to His apostles a short time after He first spoke it, further elucidating His meaning:

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends (John 15:12–13).

John referenced this statement in his first epistle:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16–17).

We can see that "laying down our lives for the brethren" does not necessarily refer to literally dying on their behalf, but rather to making sacrifices on their behalf, an ethic that certainly existed prior to Jesus' words in John 13 and 15. The Mosaic Law was full of requirements for the people of Israel to make sacrifices on behalf of their fellow Israelites, particularly on behalf of the poor, whom John also highlighted.

The Irony

What is perhaps most ironic about those who believe Jesus upgraded moral standards in His six statements in the Sermon on the Mount is that their interpretations of those allegedly higher moral standards sometimes require the transgression of what allegedly must be "lower standards." For example, Anabaptism's unique theology regarding nonresistance, based on Jesus' words about not resisting an evil person, requires Anabaptists not to use any force to stop evil people from harming others. But this "act of love" toward perpetrators entails an act of hatred for the victims, in that it violates the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Similarly, the unique theology of some Anabaptists regarding divorce and remarriage, based on their interpretation of Jesus' words in which He equated divorce and remarriage to adul-

tery, requires new Anabaptist converts to divorce their spouses and break up their families if they have previously been married and divorced—hardly an act of love toward their current spouses and common children, and one that requires them to break their marriage vows, repeating their previous sin. But Anabaptist theology about divorce and remarriage is all based on the premise that Jesus upgraded the related standards, and that therefore the old covenant standards can be ignored. On the contrary, they should not be ignored, because Jesus was not upgrading them.

Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount during the time when the old covenant was still in force, several years prior to the inauguration of the new covenant at His death and resurrection. If His most famous sermon was a revelation of new laws for the new covenant, laws that reflect a higher moral standard than what was found in the Mosaic Law, did Jesus actually not expect His audience to obey those commandments until after His death and resurrection? Or was He expecting them to live up to standards that are unique to the new covenant while still living under the old covenant? Did people in His audience who were living up to the old covenant standards and thus were righteous before God suddenly become unrighteous when the standards were upgraded that day? Were people who had been on the path to heaven suddenly transferred to the path to destruction? Anabaptists and their spiritual counterparts have no answer to these questions.

In conclusion, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was not an abrupt upending of the morality and ethics God had been teaching every person since Adam, strangely making unacceptable what had been acceptable to Him for millennia. It was not the New Testament equivalent of King Rehoboam's ratcheting up of Solomon's standards when he told the people of Israel, "Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions!" (1 Kings 12:11).

In contrast, Jesus placed on His disciples a yoke that is easy (alternatively translated "comfortable" or "pleasant") and a

burden that is light (Matt. 11:30) by focusing their energies on simply loving God and neighbor, and by empowering them through His indwelling Holy Spirit.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was a renewal and restatement of what God had already revealed from the beginning through every rain shower and sunrise (Matt. 5:44–45), through the voice of every person's conscience (Rom. 2:14–16), and through what Jesus referred to as "the weightier provisions" of the Mosaic Law, namely "justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). Any interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount that contradicts God's revelation through creation, conscience, and the crucial moral elements of the Mosaic Law should be rejected.

Once we grasp that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was not the introduction of a moral upgrade but, rather, a recovery of fundamental moral principles found in the Mosaic Law, then we can interpret it properly within its biblical context. It must be interpreted as harmonious with the Mosaic Law.

An Awakening Amidst a War

By Jonas Kurtz

I recently had an opportunity to travel to upstate New York to visit yet another Amish community awakening. Through some research from my visit, I learned some of the interesting history of the region. During the American revolution of the 1700s, wealthy landowners generally remained loyal to the British Crown, while smaller farmers and poor settlers wanted the freedom to own land, govern themselves, and serve God according to their own consciences. The result was neighbor fighting against neighbor. Tragically, men who had attended church together and shared property lines found themselves on opposite sides. In battle, soldiers would call out to neighbors whom they recognized across the lines, only to then raise their muskets and shoot at them. Over the course of the conflict, as many as 2,500 people in that region tragically lost their lives.

During my visit to upstate New York, I sadly discovered that history is repeating itself, but this time through a spiritual war. Once again, friends and neighbors, and even family members, are finding themselves at odds. Strangely, this war is between peace-loving pacifists, and more specifically, between folks who hold a common Amish heritage.

According to Jesus, however, we really should not be surprised, because He promised that families would divide over Him. In the past year, as many as 40 Amish adults have been born again, and their new lives have caused quite a stir. They are being accused of "adopting a new faith," but they believe that they have rediscovered the faith of their original Anabaptist ancestors, and their transformed lives are the proof. While they are being accused of disrupting the peace, gossiped about and in some cases excommunicated, they are responding with love and prayer for their persecutors. The result is an ever-increasing awakening to which there is no end in sight.

What follows are the testimonies of five Amish people in upstate New York who have been born again in the last year. I met them all, along with scores of others like them, during my recent visit. Some of them are still living an Amish lifestyle, but that lifestyle is no longer the emphasis. Their focus now is on following the Lord Jesus and keeping His commandments. By the way, if you were to ask any of them, none would tell you that you need to leave your Amish community. They would instead tell you, if you aren't already, that you need to be born again!

As you read, please do so with an open heart, and ask yourself if you have a story that is similar to any of theirs. If not, you can! It is as simple as believing in the Lord Jesus, which means making Him, and nothing else (including any religious tradition) your Master.

Ephraim's Education

Ephraim got more than he bargained for at school. He expected to learn to read and write, to do math and perhaps to spell. And that he learned, but he learned

more than that—a very inappropriate and perverted lesson on the topic of sex.

This lesson did not come from his teacher but rather from some students. Before long, he and a few of the other students were engaging in perverted talk and play. Ephraim instinctively knew it was wrong, but was fascinated with the topic. Having not received any education from adult figures in his life on this matter, he took advantage of this opportunity to learn.

Ephraim instinctively knew it was wrong, but once it started he couldn't stop. By age 11 Ephraim was deep into sexual sin. He hated himself, but kept his shame hidden. Finally, at age 14, he confessed to his father. To his great relief, his father did not express anger, but rather wept with him. Desperately wanting to find freedom from his guilt, Ephraim asked him, "How do I become a Christian?" To his surprise, his father did not know, and he awkwardly suggested that Ephraim might find the answer by reading a religious book.

Ephraim was afraid to ask anyone else, and as he continued to carry his guilt, he became confused, bitter and depressed. He tried to read his Bible and pray every day while clinging to the faint hope that it might earn him some favor with God, but he had no confidence that he was ready to stand before God. He had learned as a young child about the imminent return of Jesus, and he was terrified when he thought about it.

One particular day, when Ephraim was in his mid-teens, he was out in the field working when he heard a rumbling sound. The sound kept coming closer and closer. "He's coming back," Ephraim thought in a panic, "and I'm not ready! Please don't come back!" he inwardly prayed with desperation. "I don't want to go to hell!" Ephraim was greatly relieved when he realized that the sound was being made by a large truck lugging up a nearby hill. But the fear of not being ready for Jesus' return continued to plagued him often.

Growing more depressed every year and questioning the purpose of his life, Ephraim began entertaining the idea of ending it. He felt like alone and that no

one understood. Those thoughts followed him into adulthood and marriage. As recently as a year ago, Ephraim woke up in the night with a cold sweat because of a dream that Jesus had returned and found him unprepared.

But God knew all about Ephraim's struggles and He cared. Not long after that terrible dream, Ephraim received a publication in the mail called *The Lancaster Lamp*. Assuming it was meant to lead Amish people astray, he threw it into the trash. The next two issues landed in the same place. Then the fourth issue arrived. This time Ephraim decided to read it before discarding it. And one article got his attention. It was titled, "The First Ordnungs Church." He found it to be interesting. Then he noticed an invitation to attend a Bible study in his area. After some discussion with his wife, Kate they decided to go.

At that meeting, one of the men who was helping to lead it asked Ephraim if he was a Christian. Not wanting to say "no," he hesitantly said "yes." Then he listened closely to what everyone had to say as they looked at several passages in the Bible together. Something began to stir in his heart.

At the next Bible study two weeks later, Ephraim and Kate returned. This time, Ephraim's heart was even more stirred, and when he returned home that evening he couldn't sleep. It was not guilt or fear, however, that kept him up, but hope and joy. He had discovered at the Bible study that there was no reason for him to remain depressed and hopeless. He only needed to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, take Him at His Word, and cast all of His cares on Him. One verse he learned at the Bible study resonated deeply within him. It was Hebrews 4:15: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

"Jesus understands me," Ephraim realized. "He knows what I am going through!" That night at the Bible study Ephraim believed. He turned from his own feeble attempts to earn God's favor and believed what he read in Romans 10:9: "It you confess with your mouth

that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved" (see Romans 10:9). It was Jesus' death that had paid for all his sins, and it was Jesus' resurrection that made possible a spiritual rebirth.

The evening, Ephraim became a "new creation" for whom "old things have passed away and all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Since then, he no longer fears being unprepared for Lord's return. All of his former sins have been forgiven, and he is following Jesus by the power of the inward-dwelling Holy Spirit. He has the same assurance enjoyed by the apostle Paul who anticipated inheriting a "crown of righteousness" that he said is promised to all who are "looking forward to the return of Christ" (2 Timothy 4:8).

Three weeks later, Ephraim was baptized, doing what the Bible instructs all new believers to do. It was a reflection of his desire to obey his Lord to be "buried with Him in baptism and be raised to walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). He now knows that no amount of performing religious duties will help make him right with God, but rather that he has been saved "by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). He is enjoying his new freedom from depression and fear, freedom that is only found in Jesus! And because Jesus is his Lord, he is living in obedience to Him.

Since then, Ephraim and Kate, along with other believers in their Amish community, have started a Bible study in their own home where they, in accordance with Jesus' commandment found in Matthew 28:18-20, are "making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all his commandments." They are motivated by love for others, and they desire (as do all born again believers) to see others born again and set free from sin.

If you are struggling with depression, guilt, fear, shame, or anything else and you feel like no one understands your struggles, Ephraim encourages you to reflect on the verse in Hebrews 4 that is mentioned above. Don't rely on a religious figure as your leader who may or may not have compassion on you. Rather, rely on Jesus who understands

all you are going through! Ephraim welcomes your questions and comments. You can write him at 388 Mill Lane Fort Plain NY 13339, or call and text at (518) 901-8096.

Linda Finally Finds Love

11-year-old Linda sighed with relief as she looked out the side window of the car that was carrying her away from home. For a few days, she would be free from all the shouting and tension. She was traveling once again to a farmers' market a few hours away, where she would spend the next two days selling baked goods for her parents.

Try as she may, Linda could never please her mother, who constantly yelled at her and compared her to her siblings and other children at church. "Why can't you be like them?" was a regular question from her mother that hurt deeply.

If Linda objected to the comparisons, or made a mistake, she was told, "You're just stupid," or "Your attitude is the problem." Linda longed to hear that she was loved, and that she belonged. But regardless of how hard she tried to measure up, she could never quite be the person her mom wanted her to be. Linda told me, "I was so brokenhearted at times that my chest physically hurt."

On her way to her bed each night, Linda would stop in the bathroom to pray, quietly longing to know God and careful to keep her prayers hidden from her sisters. Then she would go to bed and cry herself to sleep. But one night, as she lay there crying, a breeze came through an open bedroom window and lifted the curtain. Bright moonlight shined on Linda's face. Linda took it as a hopeful sign from God. Maybe He cared. Maybe there was hope for the future.

When Linda was 13, one of her brothers passed away at birth. She tried to process it, but found herself with mixed feelings. On one hand, she was relieved that her brother didn't have to grow up in her harsh home. On the other hand, she found herself angry at God because she had not suffered a similar fate as her baby brother. She reasoned that, had she died as an infant, surely God would have welcomed her into heaven. But

now if she died, surely God would be displeased with her if her own mother was displeased. Linda feared going to hell. Bitterness against God found a place in her heart.

She knew she was not right with God, but she didn't know how to fix herself in order to find peace with God. She was baptized into the Amish church. But Linda soon realized that something was still missing. She still felt broken. She knew she needed a real relationship with God, but had no idea what to do to get it.

A little over a year ago, Linda married a man named Henry and moved away from home. At their new address, Linda and Henry began periodically receiving *The Awakening!* magazine in their mailbox. When Linda had lived with her parents, issues of *The Awakening!* were always immediately tossed into the trash. But now, living as a married adult, Linda decided that she had the right to read what she wanted. So, she decided to first read the newly-arrived issue before she tossed it in the trash. What she read, however, deeply intrigued her.

Several months later, Linda and Henry were invited to attend a gathering of Amish people who had recently been born again, now known as Cherry Valley Church. They went with a sense of excitement hoping to find what seemed to be missing in their church at home..

Two weeks later, Linda was baptized!

Why? Because unlike when she was baptized as a teenager, this time she was baptized as a born-again believer in the Lord Jesus Christ! She had heard the gospel at the gathering of new believers and believed it. Jesus died so she could be forgiven of all her sins, and He had been resurrected so she could be born again and empowered to obey God by the Holy Spirit! By her baptism, Linda wanted to publicly declare that her old self had died and that she had been raised to live a new life in Christ. She also wanted to be baptized by immersion to follow the example of her new Lord and the pattern found in the New Testament.

And there is ever more good news. Before she started following the Lord Jesus, Linda lived with headaches and constant

tension in her neck and shoulders, perhaps from the pressure of trying to be who everyone else expected her to be. Years of being verbally degraded left her struggling with her self-worth. Every negative interaction with her parents added to her depression from feeling unvalued and unloved.

However, when Linda believed in the Lord Jesus and was born again, she buried her past self. And all of the symptoms that were associated with her past disappeared. Linda told me, "Now I know I am a child of God. I no longer try to be someone else, because I know God loves me the way I am—even if my family doesn't." Linda continued, "I do not share my story to highlight the faults of others, nor to get even with anyone who has degraded me. I love all of them, and I realize that all of their negative actions are rooted in not being born again, just as was true with me as well. I'm sharing my story only to help others who can relate to it. If that is you, I want you to know that, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ you too can find the love for which you long!" If Linda's story speaks to you she would love to hear from you. You can call her at (315)-729-0092

Henry No Longer Dreads Death

When Henry was 9 years old, he sat at his 18-year-old brother Daniel's bedside as he took his last breath. After a year and a half battle with brain cancer, Daniel's battle was over. Henry's, however, had just begun.

Prior to Daniel's death Henry had a good childhood. He had a wonderful mother who made sure

he knew he was deeply loved, and he had a decent relationship with his father. But when Daniel passed away, dad changed. He became very angry and often violent. He and Henry would argue, and their rocky relationship only grew worse during Henry's teenage years.

Daniel's death negatively affected Henry as well. He became very fearful of death because of all the questions and uncertainty surrounding it. "Would he go to heaven if he died? Had he been good enough?" Henry wondered. Beyond those fears, Henry worried God would

take someone else whom he loved. He told me, "For years I lived in terror that the Lord would take my little brother from me."

Henry believed that if he could only be good enough, God would be pleased with him, and he would have peace. So, like all the other Amish young men, he eventually was baptized in the Amish church, because that was the right thing to do. He hoped that baptism would help him experience that elusive peace. But it didn't. Even after he was married to Linda (see the previous story), peace eluded him.

This past spring, however, Henry received a copy of a newsletter written by a born-again Amish bishop from Colorado that contained some very good news. Henry learned that, because he had already been a sinner all of his life, it was too late for him to earn eternal life. He also learned that if he believed in the Lord Jesus who had died to pay for the penalty of his sin, that he would receive the gift of eternal life.

So, like any wise person who hears that good news, Henry stopped hoping in his limited goodness, and he placed his faith and trust completely in Jesus. He was born again and transformed into a new person! Prior to Henry's spiritual rebirth, he did not believe that God still does miracles. Now he says, "I know God works miracles because of how I have seen peoples' lives transformed by his Spirit over this past year!"

Soon after Henry was born again, he was baptized, as the Bible commands. Now Henry no longer fears death like he previously did. He knows that, because his sins have been forgiven, he will go to heaven when he dies. He also knows that God's forgiveness of his past sins doesn't give him a license to sin in the future. And he knows that if and when he does sin, it will be unintentional, because his heart has changed, and that God's forgiveness is always available. If you aren't yet enjoying the same blessings, Henry would love to help you start! He welcomes your phone call or text at (315)-402-5910.

John Finds Jesus

John had very few friends in his childhood. Because of his soft voice and trouble with pronunciation, he was mocked by his peers at school. When it came time to pick teams for sports, John was always picked last. "I always felt like I was less valuable than the other children" John said. "I felt like I didn't matter to anyone."

Raised Amish, John did know something about God. He had heard about Him from his Amish parents and church from childhood. But although he knew about God, John did not personally know God. Throughout his teenage years and early marriage, he viewed God, not as a loving Father, but as a higher power for whom he must rightly perform.

At age 17, John was baptized, just as was expected by the church. Soon he was married and having children. Before he knew it, his oldest child was a teenager. During all those years, on an almost daily basis, John dutifully read his German Bible and prayed from his German prayer book. He devotedly participated in council meetings and communion twice a year. He diligently followed the rules to the best of his ability.

In spite of all that, John's religious devotion was not able to fill the emptiness in his heart. Even as an adult with teenage children, he still felt unloved. He still avoided speaking to people for fear of being mocked because of his speech impediment. Deep inside, he was full of anger and frustration.

Then, just this past summer, John was invited by another Amish man to a home Bible study. The man who invited him had recently been born again as a result of attending one of the Bible studies that were started among Lancaster Amish communities as a result of our publication, *The Lancaster Lamp*. Hesitantly, John and his wife, Emma, decided to take a chance. That first Bible study awoke a spiritual hunger in John that resulted in his new birth within just a few weeks!

John will now tell you that he has become a new creation in Christ. The Bible, which he dutifully read for years, has become

alive for him. He devours it daily, hungry to learn and grow. He is daily gaining confidence in his faith and new walk with the Lord. His internal struggle with anger and frustration have faded. Most importantly, for the first time in his life, John knows that he is loved! And he knows, because Jesus is his Lord, that he has inherited eternal life! Praise God!

Andrew's Awakening

Andrew grew up frequently hearing how blessed he was to be born Amish. During church sermons, the ministers would often remind everyone how thankful they should be for their precious heritage, and for the blessing of being set apart from birth from the world. How unfortunate it would have been for Andrew to have been born into a worldly, non-Amish family!

But the ministers didn't stop there. They also preached that, when Jesus returns, He will be looking for those who were born Amish to be among the Amish. After all, the ministers taught, when one wants to harvest corn, one does not search for it in a wheat field! At the time, that made sense to Andrew. He believed what they told him.

Because of all that, Andrew entered his teenage years thinking that inheriting eternal life depended on being a good Amish person. So, he did his best to keep all the rules of the church, and he prayed daily for God's forgiveness. At the expected age, he was baptized and, on his knees, made a public vow to always be a member of the church. Yet, no matter how hard he tried, Andrew could not overcome the sins in his life. Each time he fell, he would confess to God, pleading, "If You will forgive me, I will never do it again." But inevitably, he would fall back into the same sins. The harder he tried, the more trapped he felt.

BUT!!!! (Here comes the good part!) This past summer, along with his parents and siblings, Andrew attended the Bible study I previously mentioned. He knew that Bible studies were frowned upon by his church leaders, but he thought, "I'm not rebelling against the church—I just want to learn about God."

That Bible study awakened a hunger in

Andrew to study the Bible for himself, instead of relying on other peoples' interpretation of it. As he read, he was amazed at what he learned. He discovered that, as a sinner, it was much too late for him to earn his way into heaven! He stood guilty and condemned before a holy God, and he was a slave to sin, every bit as much as non-Amish people.

But Andrew also read about something that the Bible refers to as "the gospel," which means "good news." And that good news was better than Andrew had ever imagined. He learned that salvation is a gift from God, freely offered to all sinners, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Plus, the salvation offered by God includes both forgiveness of sin and freedom from sin. Andrew discovered that his sin-debt had been paid on the cross, and that a spiritual rebirth was available because of Jesus' resurrection. He only needed to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. What a revelation!

Of course, like all Amish people, Andrew had heard about Jesus all of his life. But he had never surrendered to Him. That was the missing key. Andrew finally realized that believing in Jesus means following Him no matter what the cost. And so that is exactly what he did. As a result, Andrew was born again and became a "new creation in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17). A dramatic transformation has begun in his life.

Like all who are born again, Andrew no longer wonders—as he did all of his life—about his eternal destiny. Because Jesus promised eternal life to all who would believe in Him, Andrew knows with certainty that he has it. And he fully intends to continue in faith and remain on "the narrow path that leads to eternal life" (Matt. 7:13).

Andrew also now realizes that, when Jesus returns, He will not return looking for Amish people, or for that matter, for anyone based on their religion, denomination or culture of their birth. Rather, Jesus will be looking for those who are His! Actually, He will not need to look for them, because He already knows each person who has their name written in the Lamb's book of life!

Now Andrew's encouragement to everyone is simple: Test everything you believe against the Word of God. Don't accept any doctrine or tradition—even what you hear from ministers in church—unless it agrees with the Bible! Amen!

How About You?

All of these stories are shared to reflect the redeeming power of Jesus. God loves us all. Whether you are a religious zealot or living a hidden life of sin, Jesus can give you eternal and abundant life! He can set you free from the grip of sin! He can give you love, power and purpose! He can give you a new heart and cause you to walk in his statutes and keep his commandments! (see Ezekiel 36:26)

If you will turn from following your own path, from trusting in your heritage, or trying to earn your place in heaven. If you will lift your head from despair and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be born again and begin to experience all the blessings enumerated in the previous paragraph. If you want to learn more you can contact any of those who have shared their contact info above, or you can call or text me (Jonas) at (814) 952 7758. We all welcome your feedback.

The war that took place in our nation 250 years ago resulted in horrible consequences for those who found themselves on the losing side. Many of them who survived ended up leaving all they had and fleeing to Canada to start over. But the spiritual war that is raging now carries consequences that will be much worse for those on the losing side! Don't be on the wrong side of history this time, or you will find yourself on the wrong side of eternity!

The Emperor's New Clothes

The Emperors' New Clothes is a classic literary fairy tale written by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen. It was first published in 1837 as part of his collection *Fairy Tales Told for Children*. Enjoy!

Many years ago, there lived an Emperor who was obsessed with fine clothes. He spent all his money on new outfits and

cared little for his army, the theater, or anything else—except showing off his latest garments. He had a different suit for every hour of the day, and instead of saying “the Emperor is in council,” people would say, “the Emperor is in his wardrobe.”

One day, two clever swindlers arrived in the city, pretending to be weavers. They claimed they could make the most magnificent cloth imaginable, with beautiful colors and patterns. But the cloth had a special quality: it was invisible to anyone who was unfit for their position or who was unusually stupid.

The Emperor thought, “That would be perfect! If I wore those clothes, I could tell which of my officials are wise and which are fools—and who deserves their jobs.” So he gave the two impostors a large sum of money and the finest silk and gold thread, and told them to begin weaving at once.

The swindlers set up looms and pretended to work busily, though there was nothing on the looms at all. They pocketed the expensive materials and kept up the charade.

The Emperor, eager to see the progress but a little nervous, first sent his wise old minister to check on the work. The minister, a sensible and respected man, stared at the empty looms but saw nothing. Terrified that this meant he was stupid or unfit for his office, he said nothing about it. Instead, he praised the cloth extravagantly: “What splendid colors! What a marvelous pattern!” He returned to the Emperor and reported that the cloth was magnificent.

The Emperor then sent another official, and the same thing happened—he saw nothing but pretended he did, afraid to admit the truth.

Finally, the Emperor himself went to see the weavers, accompanied by his courtiers. He too saw nothing on the looms, but since everyone else was praising the nonexistent cloth, he joined in: “Marvelous! Exquisite! It suits me perfectly.” He feared that admitting he saw nothing would prove he wasn't fit to be Emperor.

The swindlers announced the clothes were finished. They pretended to carefully undress the Emperor and dress him in the new garments—trousers, coat, mantle, and all—while everyone admired the imaginary fabric and long train. The Emperor, now naked but believing he was splendidly dressed, prepared for a grand procession through the city.

On the day of the procession, the Emperor walked proudly through the streets under a canopy, with courtiers pretending to carry his nonexistent train. The crowds, who had heard all about the magical cloth, cheered and exclaimed how beautiful the Emperor's new clothes were—none daring to admit they saw nothing, lest they seem stupid or incompetent.

Everyone praised the outfit—until a small child in the crowd, too young to understand pretense, cried out loudly: “But he hasn't got anything on!”

The child's father tried to hush him, but the words spread through the crowd like wildfire. Soon people were whispering, then laughing, and finally shouting: “The child is right! The Emperor is naked!”

The Emperor realized the truth and felt deeply ashamed, but he thought, “I must carry on.” So he walked on even more proudly, while his courtiers continued to hold up the imaginary train that didn't exist.

And that is how the vain Emperor was fooled—until innocence spoke the simple truth that everyone else was too afraid to say.

Contact Us

We appreciate everyone who communicates with us. Your letters of encouragement are what keep us encouraged, and your donations make it possible for us to continue publishing *The Awakening!*. You can write to us at The Awakening!, P.O. Box 611, Punxsutawney, PA 15767. Call or text us at 814-952- 7758 or email us at Jonas@HeavensFamily.org.

God bless you!

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The Awakening!



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- **What is Really Happening in Pinecraft?**
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