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## Symposium Review: *Amish and Old Order Mennonite Schools: A Concise History*—Joseph Stoll; and *The School by the Cornfield*—Samuel Coon

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Symposium review: **Stoll, Joseph. 2021. *Amish and Old Order Mennonite Schools: A Concise History*. Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers. Pp. 232.**

Symposium review: **Coon, Samuel D. 2020. *The School by the Cornfield*. Farmington, NM: Lamp and Light Publishers. Pp 83.**

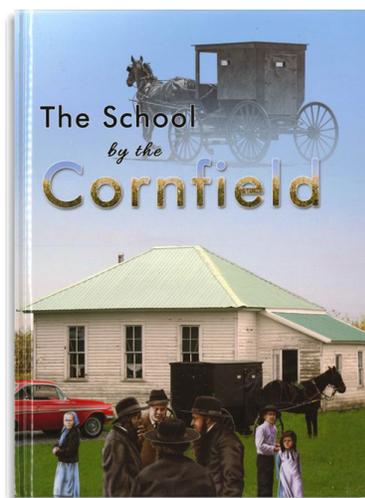
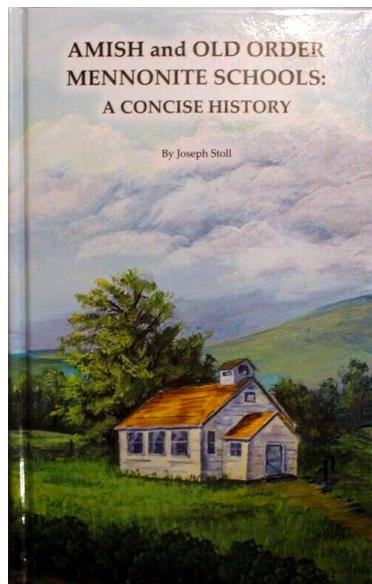
Review 1: Jewel Yoder Kuhns  
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Amish-Mennonite

Joseph Stoll, in *Amish and Old Order Mennonite Schools: A Concise History*, and Samuel Coon, in *The School by the Cornfield*, provide two very different perspectives on the struggle to establish Anabaptist schools. The books contrast primarily in their geographic and chronological scope. However, both write about parochial schools with a voice sympathetic to the vision of Amish and Mennonite school founders. They use similar sources, drawing on newspaper accounts, published Amish schools' histories, and Amish and Mennonite periodicals, as well as personal recollections from individuals involved in school conflicts.

Stoll writes to an adult audience, seeking to summarize how parochial school movements developed in states from Pennsylvania to Iowa, as well as in the Canadian province of Ontario. Coon writes to a juvenile audience, narrating the 1965 Iowa court battles over Amish residents operating schools with uncertified teachers; the conflict made national headlines when school officials tried to forcibly transfer Amish children from parochial schools to a local public school. The photos of Amish children fleeing into cornfields stirred public sympathy and galvanized legal support that would eventually coalesce into an organization with the resources to take a test case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*,

to the Supreme Court, intending to protect Amish religious liberty in educating their children.

In compiling a history of Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools, Stoll acknowledges the perspective he brought to the task: "It was humbling to realize no other living person was as closely involved as I was during those early years of our parochial schools" (7). Here Stoll establishes his authority to speak to the topic, but he voices self-deprecation in realizing that others had also invested deeply in the movement; others have also written state-specific school histories. Throughout the thirteen chapters and the appendix, Stoll follows several interconnected themes. One is that



parents ought to wield primary control in educating their children as a part of their responsibility to provide their children with "nurture and admonition" which he believes to be "education in its purest form" (8). Two, Stoll marks a change in the interactions between Anabaptist communities and public schools in the mid-twentieth century, framing earlier relationships as peaceful and later relationships as contentious. Three, Stoll's narrative positions parochial school founders as visionary, sacrificial pioneers intent on preserving a historic faith and tradition. He holds up parochial schools' exponential growth as proof of successful cultural reproduction.

Stoll's scope is ambitious: to provide a succinct, readable history of Amish schools that spans seven American states and one Canadian province over nearly a hundred years, from the first Amish school built in 1925 in Delaware, to Amish teachers' twenty-first century efforts to train teachers in Old Colony Mennonite schools in Mexico. With this survey approach, some aspects of Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities' transition from public to parochial education are omitted. Conspicuously absent, for example, is discussion of internal conflict among sectarians about whether moving away from public schools

was the appropriate path, although Stoll must have been aware of such controversy, having been close friends with such early leaders as Uria Byler, who recalled stiff opposition to the new schools from local Amish members. Instead, Stoll presents the movement toward religious schools as a natural, inevitable growth that began with a few concerned parents but quickly and painlessly drew the rest of the Amish communities together, united in a particular vision for sectarian education. This makes for a simple and neat story, but it marginalizes those *within* Anabaptist communities who were reluctant to move toward parochial schools that were costly, employed informally trained teachers, and cut off the rural relationships they had formed with their neighbors through local public schools. To be sure, Stoll's emphasis is on the benefits parochial schools brought, which is likely why he mentions drawbacks to adopting parochial schools only in passing.

Instead, Stoll frames the Amish and Old Order Mennonite parochial schools as the ideological descendant of such historical efforts as first-century Jewish synagogue schools, sixteenth-century Anabaptist informal education, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian Mennonite church schools, as well as early American Mennonite schools at the turn of the nineteenth century. He characterizes these systems as parent-controlled and church-supported, in contrast to the state schooling Napoleon Bonaparte initiated in France, and the public education Horace Mann spearheaded in the United States. Stoll acknowledges that Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities easily adopted these state schools in the United States, because the curriculum was "highly moral in content," the schools were near families' homes, and "the teachers were solid and respected citizens" (17). Ironically, while Stoll seems concerned about the advent of American public education, nineteenth-century schools were as parent-controlled as any of the previous systems he holds up as exemplary. Still, he points out the three changes that eventually brought division between "the Amish" and "the public school system": compulsory attendance mandates for at least two years in high school; consolidation of small neighborhood schools; and such objectionable additions to public school curriculum as sports and educational films.

Stoll's work has two primary strengths: first, he has compiled an eminently readable overview of the conflicts and court cases in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa, Kansas, Ontario, and Wisconsin, summarizing the regulatory gridlock that frustrated Amish school leaders and public school officials, which the 1972 *Yoder* decision implicitly resolved. (In essence, when the Supreme Court ruled that Amish parents could freely exercise their religious right to educate their children as they saw fit, which included keeping them from attending high school, public school officials stepped back from regulating Amish or Mennonite schools entirely.) This book is intended for readers who want to understand the Anabaptist school movement through a short, accessible presentation. Second, Stoll was deeply involved in efforts to build an Amish teachers' network throughout the United States and Ontario. Such chapters as "A Need to Communicate" covering the development of annual teachers' gatherings, and "A Changing Curriculum" reviewing the ongoing efforts to provide relevant curriculum to Amish schools, demonstrate the author's deep investment in providing classroom aids and continuing education. Stoll draws on his years of editing the *Blackboard Bulletin* to compile the appendix, offering selections from the *Bulletin* throughout the 1960s that he believes to be representative of the parochial school founders' vision. These conclusions make clear that the *Concise History* is framed from parochial school advocates' perspective, from an author who has spent most of his adult life in this work.

Coon takes a similar perspective, writing in support of parochial education. In an endnote, he writes that his father, Vernon Coon, was arrested in 1962 when his mother homeschooled him and his siblings; as an adult, he taught in private schools for nine years. In *The School by the Cornfield*, Coon writes about the small group of Amish parents who decided to operate private schools with Amish teachers, who did not have state-required certification. However, Coon emphasizes the plain dress of teachers and students, religious exercises in the schools, and emphasis on service and humility as the reasons for running separate schools. In contrast, he writes, public schools required patriotic salutes to the American flag, included discussions on personal advancement, and used technology such as films and radio in the class-

room. To be sure, Coon acknowledges that public school officials worried about the poor condition of the one-room school houses and the curriculum Amish students used, as well as the qualifications of Amish teachers.

Perhaps Coon is trying to simplify the conflict between Amish parents and school officials for the juvenile audience he aims to educate. Writing about the religious concerns of Amish parents, as well as the arrests and fines they suffered, frames the story as one of religious persecution. Indeed, likely the Amish parents and teachers interpreted the events this way, and they successfully convinced the governor and legislature of Iowa to protect their parochial schools through special legislation. The reality, though, is that much of the conflict was rooted in the local politics of school district reorganization; the non-Amish residents who did not want to consolidate with a nearby district were still angry that their Amish neighbors had voted to join, believing that they could preserve their small schools because of an informal agreement with the local superintendent. Coon mentions this controversy in a footnote, but he leaves the fracas out of the main body of the text.

Thus, Coon technically provides a factual account of the Iowa controversy, but his framing of the conflict may be misleading for the children hearing or reading the story without looking at the footnotes. The local community likely cared very little that Amish teachers led prayers and religious songs; many rural public schools preserved these practices. Instead, quite a number of local residents supported the school superintendent and his colleagues fining and jailing Amish parents because they believed this particular Amish group to have double-crossed them in voting for the district consolidation and to be intent on avoiding school regulations other Amish districts in the area accepted.

*The School by the Cornfield* is beautifully illustrated and simply written, a resource that teachers and parents of children in elementary grades can use to open discussion of the beginnings of Amish parochial schools. Coon has faithfully represented the views of Amish parents in undertaking religious education, expanding the available materials on twentieth-century Anabaptist history. Still, adults sharing this story with children might be advised to read other perspectives on the Iowa controversy. Coon quotes from Donald

A. Erickson's chapter "Showdown at an Amish Schoolhouse," in *Compulsory Education and the Amish: The Right Not to Be Modern* (1975). In addition, Stoll's chapter, "Deadlock in Iowa," in the *Concise History* reviewed above makes clear the historical context of community conflict. Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr., has written *Community Conflict, Public Opinion, and the Law: The Amish Dispute in Iowa* (1969), which presents the perspectives of all those involved in the conflict. While Coon's work is a helpful opening to discussion of recent developments in Anabaptist education, adult readers may need to lead children in reflecting on the ways Amish people have, at times, had conflicts with their neighbors that stem as much from politics as from religion.

*Jewel Yoder Kuhns recently received her M.A. in history from Case Western Reserve University, where she conducted her thesis research on the development of Amish parochial schooling in Geauga County, OH.*

Review 2: Daniel L. Yoder  
Old Order Amish ("Michigan churches")

Stoll offers an historical account of parochial school education. He shows how certain spiritual values from their own belief systems prompted Amish and Mennonite parents to take responsibility for their children's education. These parents sought a greater *depth* for their children's education than the *breadth* consolidated public schools were offering. Stoll's chronological account is very readable and clearly states the objections raised by concerned parents. As extra-curricular activities in the public school exerted greater influence on children's minds, and as school extended across a longer segment of children's development, there was less time for parental influences and instruction and less time for adolescents to be at home with their parents. Parental concerns initially focused on certain subjects no longer covered in the secular school system. However, as objectionable programs and teachings arose, such as the emphases on sports, patriotism, immorality, and the general loss of Christian virtues, it seemed imperative to establish an alternative education system. The parochial school alternative eventually led to

Amish and Mennonites publishing curriculum that develops and supports spiritual values.

Much of the public school system was driven by an agenda of consolidation, which in turn increased the momentum of anti-Christian pressures. This defined the conflict that enveloped the Plain People. Responses from public school administrators to Amish attempts to establish an alternative education system varied greatly from state to state and even among administrators. Objections ranged from the quality and quantity of education to the pupil enrollment count's impact on funding. Most of the aggressive actions taken by public school officials were motivated by their perception of the inferior education of parochial schools. Subtle pressures to get Amish pupils enrolled in public schools also came, including hints of attendance leniency *after* the day public school enrollment was logged. In compromise, many Amish schools agreed to certified teachers from outside their own people and to using the same curriculum used in the public schools. However, Amish interest in improving their own educational offering and in not investing as much of the calendar year in school sparked increasing interest among their own people in taking on school administration and teaching positions.

In Wisconsin, the conflict escalated to the U.S. Supreme Court, where public school officials attempted to prove the inadequacy of the Amish to educate their children sufficiently for life. At the same time, the Amish cause was aided by very capable volunteer defenders from various professional fields. Dr. John A. Hostetler was addressed at one point by the prosecutor and asked whether it could correctly be assumed that the principle purpose of education was to get ahead in the world. The professor's response—"It depends on which world"—was key to the verdict. One significant result of this conflict was the legal right for parents throughout America to take more responsibility for the education of their children. This privilege still allows them to be involved in choices for their children's education. They may take the easy way and send them to school in their own public school district, or even an adjacent district if they wish to take some responsibility for transportation. They can also choose between many possible options of parochial (church) schools, or publicly funded charter schools, or even homeschooling and selecting their own curriculum, all according to their

preference or ability. While some states maintain some specific academic testing requirements, others do not. As a direct result of these liberties, charter schools have been established in some states, which are eligible for public funding but maintain much higher minimum academic standards than the public school system. Of course, those schools are not permitted to specifically teach biblical values during academic instruction. Stoll doesn't elaborate on these aspects but focuses mainly on the historical narrative.

Coon relates the story of the Hazleton, IA, school conflict as a children's book. He fairly accurately expresses the emotional effect left on the children involved. They apparently were utilized as pawns in the power play for public school officials who were actually quite desperate to preserve their funding for consolidation costs. This funding would be lost to the extent it was based on the count of pupils withdrawn from the public school system. Coon does an exceptional job of providing a story that children can empathize with, even if these experiences were more than a generation from their own. In the same breath, Coon provides footnotes that enable adults to explore the story more, in an effort to enhance the story's value for children who lack the maturity to research these facts.

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