

2022

Review of: *Grounded Upon God's Word: The Life and Labours of Jakob Amman—Andrew V St. Marie and Mike Atnip*

Osiah Horst

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Horst, Osiah. 2022. "Review of: *Grounded Upon God's Word: The Life and Labours of Jakob Amman—Andrew V. Ste. Marie and Mike Atnip.*" *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 10(1):137-38.

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Review of: **Ste. Marie, Andrew V., and Mike Atnip. *Grounded Upon God's Word: The Life and Labours of Jakob Amman*. Manchester, MI: Sermon on the Mount Publishing. Pp. 177. \$9.95.**

By Osiah Horst
Markham Waterloo Old Order Mennonite
Conference

This book is an easy read for the average person, and has adequate footnotes, bibliography, and photos for the interested student. It relies heavily on John D. Roth's "Letters of the Amish Division" for sources. While it is quite factual, it presents facts in story form. The book focuses on Amman's life, not just on the Amish division. It is part of the "Cross Bearers Series" which is designed to bring to today's youth, stories of role models from history. Other books in the series introduce Conrad Grebel and Michael Sattler in a similar easy reading format.

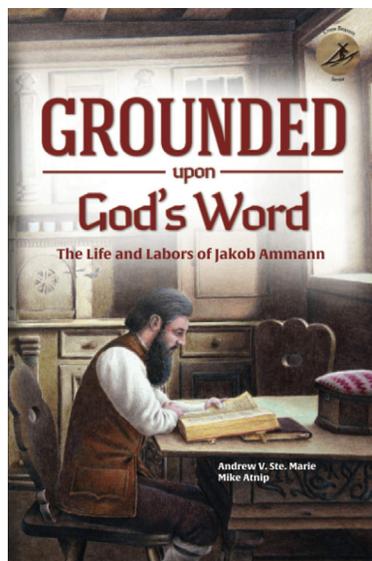
The book starts with a timeline so we can place events in an historical context at a glance. This timeline could have been expanded to include more peripheral facts, such as the initial signing of the Dortrecht Confession of Faith and a few events from secular history. This, however, is but a minor detail.

The first two chapters introduce the conditions in the era in which Jakob Amman was born – years of war, the plagues – the Black Death and the Little Ice Age. It is only in the third chapter that we really begin to look at the place of Jakob's birth in the beautiful Simmental Valley of Switzerland. We read of his early years and his eventual conversion to the Anabaptist faith. In chapter 5, we learn of the Swiss Brethern movement which began 150 years before Jakob's time and how that movement seems to have lost some of its zeal over the years. The authors state that one of their goals in writing is to "bring the story de-stereotyped" or freed from the negative connotations so long attached to the Amman name. That de-stereotyping centers mostly around his part in the Amish division, so this is the part that I am drawn to.

When Jakob was ordained to the ministry as a young man in the Oberland, he was a new convert to Anabaptism and had zeal that is so common in that situation. He seemed to have no trouble convincing most of the ministers in his area, who were mostly newer converts as well, that the longer established congregations and leaders in the Emmental had accepted far too much compromise in dealing with the state church and local communities. There were several specific incidents among the Emmental congregations that troubled Amman to the point that he set out with others of his co-workers to investigate them. One had to do with a woman who it appeared had been caught lying, but Bishop Reist did not discipline her the way Amman determined would have been appropriate. The other matter had to do with the status of the "*halb-Taufer*" or "true Hearted", people from the Reformed churches who were sympathetic to the plight of the Swiss Brethern but were not prepared to commit to Anabaptism. The older churches were accused of considering the True Hearted as being saved.

Regarding the salvation of the True Hearted, Amman wrote "There is only one faith that is valid before God, there is only one people who are the bride of Christ"

(p. 66). Amman did not teach that they were unsaved, but they could not be consoled as being "saved" when they had not made a commitment to take up the cross of Christ and to be baptized. Nor did he ask anyone to shun the truehearted. I found it very interesting that the Dortrecht Confession of Faith played such a prominent part in this conflict. The Swiss Brethern had never taken a united stand on the practice of shunning after the ban. The Oberlanders and Amman found this unsatisfactory, believing that a full shunning was required according to Dortrecht while the Emmantalers shunned only at the communion table. (It seems to me that we Mennonites have never quite figured out which is right – I remember one year during our instruction classes from the Dortrecht Confession that one experienced minister stumbled greatly while trying to explain the seventeenth article on shunning, but then recovered his momentum



when he moved into article 18. If we don't understand the ban properly, it is difficult to understand shunning.)

Amman's actions and choice of words, while well meant, were not wise and not well accepted by the Emmental group, who had been "battling for survival for two centuries and had hung on to existence" (p. 52). A writer from the Emmental summed it up this way:

There was a man named Jakob Ammann who came to the opinion that the true Christian discipline had been lost to a certain extent and resolved that he wanted, according to his thinking, to rebuild the temple of God on the old foundations. He especially promoted a doctrine regarding the shunning of those who had been banned in which he wanted that the banned person should be avoided in physical and spiritual meals.... Thereupon, the people split into two parts, and as a consequence thereof, many discussions were held with each other, but no good fruit seemed to grow out of it. (p. 54)

The discussions became more than discussions as the Amman side banned a number of the Emmental leadership, with the Emmentalers eventually banning all Amish. Later, Amman did admit that he was too rash and his words too harsh so he placed himself in the ban, hoping this might bring about reconciliation but the wounds were too deep.

It depends greatly on how we are reading this book – are we interested in Amman's life in general, with the Amish division being a part of that life or is the Amish division where our interest lies? The authors set out to de-stereotype Amman's story; I believe they did so by shifting the blame for the division from Amman to Reist. I find it difficult to see how we can properly place blame on a situation that occurred three hundred and twenty-five years ago, when we can't agree on who should get the blame for recent problems in our own congregation or conference. The other question I have is, do we really benefit by apportioning blame, either in that event long ago or in the current situation? I would argue that while we might try to learn from the mistakes of others, there is no benefit in blaming.

Trying to look back, I take exception to a statement the authors make. "It is time Jakob quits getting blamed for the division. Yes, his failures added fuel to the fire, but underlying the whole

situation were two visions, two irreconcilable visions: church discipline and *permissiveness*, zeal and *lukewarmness*" (emphasis mine). There may have been two visions, but I cannot believe that Hans Reist had a goal of having a permissive or lukewarm church. And I doubt that those two visions hold true for either side today. Both Amish and Mennonites today have some church discipline and zeal; as well as some permissiveness and lukewarmness.

I would have preferred that the authors be conciliatory, in the style of Roth, where he writes:

Why Did the Division Occur? I have tried to suggest in this brief introduction that the roots of the Amish division run much deeper than the mere personality differences of character flaws of any single individual. ..certain individuals did at times become the focus of controversy, but the broader issues at stake were too varied, the debate too impassioned and the context too complicated to be explained away as the product of Jakob Amman's stubborn personality or Hans Reist's dismissive arrogance [...] It is a story of resolve and faith, of human frailty and sin. In the end, it is a story which leaves ample room on every side for God's forgiveness and grace" (pp. 13, 18).

The authors do point to this as well in an inset "Do not forget that there are two sides to every story. The Bernese Anabaptists may indeed have been losing their zeal and compromising in some areas, but nevertheless, there is clear evidence that they continued to leave a good testimony to their neighbours. They refer to a book *Probier-Stein* ("Touchstone") (Thormann 2005) commissioned by the Reformed church and government, who considered the Anabaptists enough of a threat that they devoted 600 pages to trying to keep their members from joining the Anabaptists" (p. 50).

References

- Roth, John (ed.). 1993[2002]. *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society.
- Thormann, George [transl. Katharina Epp]. 2005. *Probier-Stein*.

Order from Sermon on the Mount Publishing, P.O. Box 246, Manchester, MI 48158; 734-428-0488.