Chapter Seven: Passing on the Faith

Overview

Chapter Seven focuses on education and the transmission of Amish culture across the generations by:

• Setting the historical context of Amish education;
• Tracing the conflict between the Amish and state officials over education;
• Summarizing Amish arguments against consolidated, public schools;
• Describing the rise of private Amish schools;
• Explaining why public education threatens the survival of Amish life;
• Describing the organization, curriculum and goals of Amish schools today;
• Tracing the compromises and agreements that developed between the Amish and state;
• Exploring why some of the graduates of Amish schools rebel in their teenage years; and
• Explaining how teenage rowdiness may help to build adult commitment to the church.

Key Points

• Amish schools emerged in the last half of the twentieth century and are very important to the transmission and preservation of Amish life and culture. In a few states a small number of Amish students attend small rural public schools but the bulk of Amish youth attend private Amish schools.

• Explore the historical factors that made one-room rural public schools acceptable to the Amish. Why were the Amish comfortable with the rural public schools in the first half of the twentieth century?

• Consider which aspects of the consolidated public schools threatened Amish values? (See the list on page 173). Two key concerns were relationships with non-Amish peers and the values and world view taught by non-Amish teachers. Show why the threat of
public schools was so serious that some parents were willing to sit in prison to keep their children out of public schools.

- Kraybill argues (pages 174-177) that the public school was a Great Separator that would pull Amish society apart, lead youth away from Amish life, and immerse them in modern life and culture. Is this a persuasive argument? Does the experience of other minority groups in American society confirm the Amish fear of public schools?

- In many ways, Amish schools with their local and parochial approach to education restrict the consciousness of Amish youth (see page 177). Does such a parochial education shortchange Amish youth by suppressing awareness and limiting educational opportunity? Do the larger benefits of Amish society outweigh the limitations of their schools?

- Should the competence and proficiency of Amish schools be judged by public school standards or by the needs of Amish society? Should the state be involved in evaluating Amish schools? Who should set the standards for Amish schools?

- Wisconsin vs. Yoder was an important U. S. Supreme Court decision that not only protects Amish education, but the religious freedom of other groups as well. Explore some reasons why the Supreme Court was willing to make this historic decision that benefitted the Amish.

- Social continuity is a key difference between present-day Amish schools and public education. In Amish schools one pupil may have the same teacher for all eight grades. An Amish teacher may only need to relate to a dozen families, because each has several pupils from first to eighth grade in a 30-pupil school house. How does such tight social continuity compare with the diversity and discontinuity of contemporary public schools?
Without electricity, Amish schools are devoid of virtually all the technology that is typical in public schools. Will Amish schools, in their present form, adequately prepare the rising generation of Amish youth to survive as more and more members are leaving farming and entering business?

Kraybill argues (pages 184-187) that Amish youth have a perceived choice as to whether or not they want to join the church and that the perception of choice may enhance the commitment of adults to the *Ordnung* of the church. Thus the sowing of wild oats may actually help to increase adult compliance with church regulations. Is this a viable argument or just a sociological spin that puts a good face on a social problem?

**Questions**

1. Identify and discuss the reasons behind the Amish fear of public education.
2. How might Amish society be different today if all Amish children were educated in public schools today?
3. Describe the role and purpose of Amish schools and assess how well they are fulfilling their mission and purpose.
4. Compare the curriculum of a typical Amish school with the subjects you studied in the first eight grades. How did the curriculum that you studied prepare you for life in contemporary society? How does an Amish education prepare youth for citizenship in Amish society?
5. Is the freedom given Amish youth during their *Rumspringa* years a blessing or a blight to the Amish Church?
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6. In 1998 two Amish-raised youth were arrested for buying drugs from members of the Pagan Motorcycle Gang and selling the drugs to Amish youth. What does this story suggest about the role of Amish schools, social contact with the outside world, and the future of Amish society?

7. Propose changes to the Amish school system. List and discuss specific ways that you would improve Amish schools.

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “Amish children should be required to spend at least two years in public high schools so that they have a better understanding of the outside world, and more vocational opportunities, and can make a good choice about joining or leaving the Amish.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “Amish schools are suppressing consciousness, restricting freedom and curtailing human rights and thus should be closed.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The U.S. Supreme Court made a big mistake when it permitted Amish youth to leave school at the end of eighth grade.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “The government should require all Amish schools to teach science so that Amish youth have a well-rounded education.”

5. Support or Refute this statement: “State governments should set the standards for Amish schools, require teachers to pass competency exams, and evaluate the schools according to state educational standards.”

6. Support or Refute this statement: “With all due respect, the Amish cannot be considered an “educated” people.”
**Activities**

1. Identify the total number of teachers that you had from kindergarten through eighth grade. Make a list of all the subjects that you studied in school over the same period of time. A typical Amish child may have only one or two teachers and about 6 different academic subjects. How does your number of teachers and subjects differ from a typical Amish experience? What does this say about the nature of the two different educational systems?

2. Conduct a brief interview with three of your friends. Ask them several questions about Amish youth. Such as: a) Have any Amish youth ever been arrested for selling drugs? b) Do Amish youth have a choice about joining the church? c) How many grades must Amish youth complete before they can leave school? d) What do Amish youth do for recreation? e) Should Amish youth be required to attend at least two years of public school?

3. Assume again that you are an Amish Bishop. A 21 year-old baptized member of your congregation visits with you and requests permission to attend high school so she can go to college to become a nurse and help people. How would you respond? What would you argue and why?

4. Compare and contrast the following aspects of an Amish school and public middle school:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural diversity</th>
<th>Sports</th>
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<td>Size</td>
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<td>Values</td>
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<td>Dress</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
<td>Art</td>
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