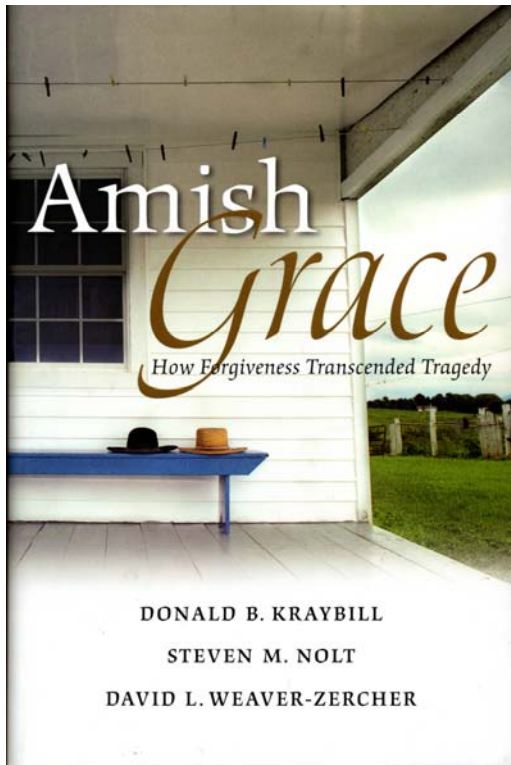


**Book title:** *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcends Tragedy*  
**Authors:** Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt & David L. Weaver-Zercher  
**Publisher:** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 235 pp, hardback \$33.99  
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On 2 October 2006 there was yet another US school massacre. Ten young girls were tied up and shot. The oldest, aged 13, had said, “Shoot me first,” hoping in vain to spare the others. She and four others died, two of them sisters, and the rest were seriously injured. But in this case the setting was the utterly surprising one of a tiny one room, one teacher schoolhouse at a place called Nickel Mines, in the deeply Christian, scrupulously non-violent Amish community of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Charles Carl Roberts, the perpetrator, then turned a gun on himself. He had left suicide notes to his family saying he was angry with God for the death of their first-born daughter nine years before. He left a wife, Amy, and three children aged 8, 6 and eighteen months. He was non-Amish, but the family were church-goers. His motivation seemed irrational, but he had chosen his targets and planned his crime and with chilling care and forethought. Since he had killed himself, no trial was necessary.

What proved most extraordinary and at times controversial about this event, and readers will probably remember this, was the fact that within days the Amish community expressed forgiveness for the horrific killing of their children and personally visited Amy Roberts to express to her their sorrow and forgiveness for what her husband had done. “The Amish quickly realized that Roberts’s widow and children were also victims of the shooting .... Unlike the Amish victims, the Roberts family had to bear the shame of having a loved one inflict such pain on innocent children and families”. (P. 43) Of the 75 people who attended the gunman’s burial, grieving, more than half were Amish. They quietly offered flowers and meals and financial help to the family, not only just at first, but over time.

Therefore this book *Amish Grace*, is mainly about the nature of Christian forgiveness, and its significance in the Bible, in Christian thought and Amish culture in particular.

For those familiar with the history and ethos of the Amish, there was nothing at all surprising about the difficult but gracious, swift and ongoing offering of forgiveness. Some in the Amish community were bewildered that people were astonished. “It’s just standard Christian forgiveness; it’s what everyone should be doing,” one said .... “Before the media made such a big deal of forgiveness, I never realized that it was so much part of our life. I just never realized how central it is to us,” said another. (P 49)

There it is, the necessity of forgiving – all through the Testament, in the Gospels and epistles, and especially in the Sermon on the Mount – central in the Lord’s Prayer and Jesus’ teaching about prayer, including in parables such as the story of the unforgiving debtor in Matthew 18 – and in Jesus’ own supreme example on the cross, “Father, forgive...” . But the difference seems to be that the Amish, in the most painful situation imaginable, were able not just individually but as a close-knit community, to practise what the rest of us (sometimes) preach, and all too rarely practise.

The Amish are descendents of sixteenth century Anabaptists (re-baptizers) who fled persecution in Europe and eventually settled in America, resolving to preserve their old ways of life to an extraordinary and even quaint degree. They have made ethical teaching about forgiveness totally central in their lives, and they train children to practise it. So it was indeed unthinkable to them **not** to forgive. They also have an emphasis not widely taught in other churches, though it can be found clearly in Matthew 6:14-15, right after the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer – “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you.” The Amish say “**We must** forgive. Unless we forgive, God will not forgive us”. Pp 96-97

Here we enter theologically subtle and deep waters. The standard Protestant understanding puts the grace (undeserved favour) of God first and says that because we have received the grace of forgiveness, we must forgive those who have wronged us. In the other emphasis there is a danger of implying that we **earn** forgiveness by forgiving others. No, but perhaps we should see it as clearing the channel for receiving God’s forgiveness and peace as it flows to us.

Besides its analysis of grace and forgiveness, the book is a mine of information about the Amish, their fascinating history and culture. In 1993 my husband and I stayed with Christian friends, former missionaries, in Lancaster County. As we drove around sightseeing, we passed many of the Amish buggies clip-clopping along. We plied our friends with questions about their Amish neighbours. We visited craft shops in the quaintly named town of Intercourse, and bought patchwork cushion covers and a handmade male doll, dressed in Amish clothing – black overalls, a blue shirt, and a broad-brimmed black hat – jammed onto its completely featureless white cloth face.

The reason? “Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven image, or the likeness of anything ...” No face on the doll, to guard against image-making and idol worship. We also met some Mennonite people, a less strict, but related Anabaptist group. The ladies wore old-fashioned long dresses and little lace caps on their heads.

It appeared to our friends that the Amish are very admirable, gentle and godly people, but that there is a strong strand of legalism and literalism in their culture. In that sense, despite the title of this book, one could say that the full implications of the grace of God, and justification by faith alone, are largely missing. They also make little attempt to evangelize or share their faith.

The authors of this book, while not Amish themselves, are well-known authorities on them and deeply admire their culture. They too come from the related Mennonite or wider Anabaptist tradition. There is some scholarly discussion of the Amish lifestyle and traditions but little of their theology – which may be appropriate as the Amish themselves pay little attention to it. Their church discipline practices and the practice of the shunning of their own former members who leave the fold come under scrutiny, as these seem to cut across the ideal of forgiveness. We learn that the Amish have no formal clergy, training colleges or higher education.

But for lessons in forgiving the unforgivable with an outsider's crime, and its devastating impact on their community and families, we need to go and learn from them. To quote Tony Campolo – “An inside look at a series of events that showed the world what Christlike forgiveness is all about ...” and in the words of Philip Yancey: “*Amish Grace* dissects the deep-rooted pattern of Amish forgiveness and grace that, after the Nickel Mines tragedy, caused the world to gasp.”

*Lesley Hicks* 17 June 2008