

BIBLICAL INERRANCY, CHURCH DISCIPLINE, AND THE MENNONITE-AMISH SPLIT

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Abstract: *Between 1693 and 1700 a schism unfolded between the Anabaptists in Switzerland over the matter of biblical inerrancy and its implications for church discipline. The majority of Anabaptists sided with the Mennonite pastor Hans Reist, while a sizeable minority sided with Reist's erstwhile colleague Jakob Ammann. This split, known as the Amish Division, separated the Mennonites from Ammann's followers, who became known as the Amish. This paper will show that the split ultimately boiled down to the issue of whose interpretation of a cluster of texts—Matt 9:11, Matt 15:11, Matt 18:15–20, and 1 Cor 5:6–11—proved consistent with inerrancy. This article delineates the interpretations of both Reist and Ammann. The article concludes by using the Reist-Ammann disagreement to assess two exegetical methods frequently used by evangelicals, namely harmonization and subordination of less clear texts to more clear texts, in reconciling passages that appear opposed to one another.*

Key words: *inerrancy, church discipline, Mennonites, Amish, Anabaptism, Hans Reist, Jakob Ammann, harmonization*

Between 1693 and 1700 a schism unfolded between the Anabaptists in Switzerland, southwestern Germany, and southeastern France over the matter of biblical inerrancy and its implications for church discipline.¹ As demonstrated by John Hostetler's *Amish Society*, the majority of Anabaptists sided with the Swiss Brethren pastor Hans Reist (fl. 1670–1704), while a sizeable minority sided with Reist's erstwhile colleague Jakob Ammann (1644–c. 1720).² This split, known as the Amish Division, separated the Swiss Brethren (who would later adopt the broader name Mennonites) from Ammann's followers, who became known as the Amish. This piece will investigate one major issue that led to the split. This issue was whose interpretation of a cluster of texts—Matt 9:10–13 and parallels, Matt 15:11 and parallels, Matt 18:15–20, and 1 Cor 5:6–11—proved consistent with biblical inerrancy.

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¹ Although the term “inerrancy” was never used by the seventeenth-century Anabaptists, they clearly subscribed to and regularly utilized the concept encapsulated by the term, namely, that “the Bible is completely true and without error in everything that it affirms” (Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 99).

² John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (4th ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 33–40. Ammann was probably ordained to the ministry by Reist. See Hanspeter Jecker, “Das Dordrechter Bekenntnis und die Amische Spaltung,” in *Les Amish: Origine et particularismes 1693–1993* (ed. Lydie Hege and Christoph Wiebe; Ingersheim, France: Association française d'histoire anabaptiste-mennonite, 1996), 221.

rancy.³ Employing the primary sourcebook *Letters of the Amish Division*,⁴ the paper will delineate the interpretations of both Reist and Ammann. Reist argued that the only way for all four texts to be harmonized is simply to prohibit unrepentant sinners from partaking in the Lord's Supper and other affairs of the church. Reist claimed that, taken together, the texts rule out the practice of shunning unrepentant sinners from normal social interaction.⁵ By contrast, Ammann argued that the only way for 1 Cor 5:11 and Matt 18:17 to be taken at face value is to practice shunning, refusing even to eat with unrepentant sinners. For biblical inerrancy demands that around these clear verses, Ammann insisted, the interpretation of the other, more ambiguous verses must be centered.⁶ The article will display the relevance of the Reist-Ammann disagreement for deeper understanding of two exegetical methods frequently used by evangelicals, namely harmonization and subordination of less clear texts to more clear texts, in reconciling passages that appear opposed to one another.

I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMISH DIVISION

During the 1660s and the early 1690s, Swiss authorities launched severe waves of persecution against the Anabaptists, who designated themselves as Swiss Brethren, in an attempt to eliminate them from the confederacy. Many Anabaptists in the major cities of Switzerland responded by fleeing their native country northward to Alsace or to the Palatinate. However, in the remote villages and isolated hamlets of the Emmental east of Bern, Anabaptists survived and successfully integrated themselves into local community life.⁷ Their Reformed neighbors viewed them as righteous and hard-working people whose odd religious practices posed no danger to the commonweal.⁸ In the summer of 1693, the newly formed Anabaptist congregations in Alsace sent the pastor Jakob Ammann and several of his colleagues on an investigative trip to the Emmental to elucidate the position of Men-

³ Although a major issue, this was not the only issue. Other points of contention included the frequency of the Lord's Supper, the appropriateness of footwashing, whether excommunication required unanimous consent of the entire congregation or just of the ministers and elders, and precisely which offenses called for church discipline. One could easily regard the last two issues as corollaries of the interpretive problem on which this piece focuses. For further detail see Robert Baecher, "Research Note: The 'Patriarche' of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (2000): 145–58; Mark Furner, "Research Note: On the Trail of Jacob Ammann," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (2000): 326–28; John Hüppi, "Research Note: Identifying Jacob Ammann," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (2000): 329–39.

⁴ *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook*, trans. and ed. John D. Roth (2nd ed.; Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 2002). In light of the latest manuscript discoveries, Heinrich Funck points out various passages in the *Letters* that need revision. However, none of these passages are quoted in this article. See Funck, "Der Mann, den sie gebrandmarkt haben,' oder: Was hat das Zürcher Täuferum mit der Entstehung der Amischen zu tun?," in *Die Zürcher Täufer 1525–1700* (ed. Urs B. Leu and Christian Scheidegger; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007), 277–314.

⁵ *Letters*, 47–48, 51–54. In the latter selection Reist's foremost supporter Jakob Gut spells out this implication clearly.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32–39.

⁷ Tom Meyers, "The Amish Division: A Review of the Literature," in *Les Amish*, 72–93.

⁸ *Letters*, 3–6.

nonite ministers there on the question of church discipline (*Ordnung*).⁹ Having immigrated to Alsace in 1693 following the reinstatement of Swiss persecution, Ammann was quite concerned with the possibility that the native churches had only survived by compromising the biblical mandate to remain distinct from the world, emphasized in the foundational 1527 *Schleitheim Confession*. For he knew that many Anabaptists around Bern were passively complying with the mandates of the Swiss authorities. These Anabaptists remained active members of their own congregations while at the same time attending services in the state Reformed church, receiving communion with their Reformed neighbors, and even permitting their infants to be baptized while personally regarding the ceremony as a mere baby-washing that did neither spiritual good nor spiritual harm.¹⁰ Ammann perceived all such activities as dissimulation and flagrant idolatry, as he believed the Reformed worshiped a false Jesus who did not demand the baptism of professed disciples or the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount. On the basis of 1 Cor 5:1—“But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people”—Ammann insisted that Anabaptists who unrepentantly engaged in compromise actions must be shunned by the faithful for their idolatry.¹¹

Upon arriving in the Emmental, Ammann and his party requested a meeting with the local Swiss Brethren in the barn of minister Niklaus Moser at Langnau.¹² When Ammann asked the assembly whether a believer could eat with a lapsed Anabaptist who attended the state church, Hans Reist replied by paraphrasing Matt 15:11 as follows: “What goes into the mouth does not defile the person but what comes out of the mouth, that defiles a man.”¹³ By this Reist meant that a faithful Anabaptist could eat with a lapsed Anabaptist, as the faithful Anabaptist’s eating (“What goes into the mouth”) had no power to defile him. While Reist concurred with Ammann that a lapsed Anabaptist should be disciplined according to the threefold pattern of Matt 18:15–20 (individual, small group, and congregational rebukes), he denied that the Anabaptist, even if excommunicated from the congregation, should be shunned from normal social interaction by the members of the congregation. Ammann then rejected out of hand Matt 15:11 as having any bearing on the issue of shunning, causing a standoff between himself and Reist.¹⁴ At this point, the assembly decided to adjourn and reconvene fourteen days later after considering both sides. During that period, Ammann repeatedly and publicly denounced Reist as “a rabble-rouser who slandered and shamed God’s Word,” sever-

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5; Ernst Müller, *Geschichte der Bernischen Täufer: nach den Urkunden dargestellt* (Frauenfeld: J. Hubers, 1895), 125–27; Hanspeter Jecker, “Die Entstehung der Amischen: Ein kurzer Abriss über den Stand der Forschung,” *Mennonitica Helvetica* 26/27 (2003/2004): 215–22.

¹¹ *Letters*, 34. All translations of Scripture are from the NIV.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

al times in Reist's presence.¹⁵ When the assembly reconvened, Ammann read aloud a letter of complaint against Reist and then demanded according to Matthew 18 that Reist "be excommunicated and banned from the Christian church and the fellowship of God."¹⁶ For in Ammann's assessment, his opposition of Reist two weeks prior constituted Reist's individual warning, and his opposition of Reist before groups of at least two or three during the intervening time more than sufficed for Reist's small group warning, as Reist had never altered his position. Once Ammann read his letter before the assembly and Reist still maintained his purportedly unbiblical view of shunning, for Ammann the congregational warning had been given to and then ignored by Reist. As Ammann expressed his perception of the situation: "Because of all this, Hans Reist was excommunicated from the Christian church and godly fellowship as an apostate, heretic, and rabble-rouser because he strays from the true path and the heavenly hosts and he rallies the people to a false understanding, for he has been admonished much more often than one time and a second time."¹⁷ At this juncture, lines were formally drawn, as a significant minority of Anabaptists sided with Ammann (calling themselves Amish), while most sided with Reist (retaining the name Swiss Brethren and in the next century designating themselves as Mennonites along with Dutch and German Anabaptists who already bore that name).

These dividing lines hardened between 1694 and 1700, with each party composing increasingly polemical treatises aimed at persuading Anabaptists in the Emmental to reject the other side as false brethren.¹⁸ Among these treatises was the *Statement from Ohnenheim* (1694), signed by Reist and a group of like-minded ministers from the Palatinate and Switzerland. Here Reist claimed that 1 Cor 5:11, Ammann's central proof-text, had nothing to do with daily eating but rather referred to partaking of the Lord's Supper. Since Reist disallowed lapsed Anabaptists—even prior to the threefold disciplinary process of Matthew 18—from eating the Supper because of the public nature of their sin, he insisted that he could not be legitimate-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸ Milton Gascho, "The Amish Division 1693–1697 in Switzerland and Alsace," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11 (1937): 251–53. For example, Reist and his colleagues stated in 1694 that "we cannot and do not desire to consider [Ammann] and all those who stand with him as brothers and sisters" (*Letters*, 47–48). By 1697, Ammann's party was branded "fierce wolves . . . who will not spare the flock" and speakers of "a false doctrine to draw the disciples to them" (cf. Acts 20:29–30), and their practice of shunning was branded as "bend[ing] their knees before Baal" and "the teaching of the Antichrist and his servants" (*Letters*, 72–73). On the other hand, in 1693 Ammann denounced the Reist group with these words: "Therefore we say and attest with God's Word that such people are thieves and murderers who with their false teaching rob poor souls of eternal life . . . after the fashion of false prophets and deceitful workers from whom we should separate ourselves. For they preach according to the judgments of their hearts and not from the mouth of the Lord. They strengthen the hands of the wicked and announce there is peace where there is no peace. Therefore, they are apostate and heretical people who are rightly avoided and punished as those who are banned" (*Letters*, 38–39). The Ammann group's rhetoric against the Reist party intensified, such that when the two sides met in 1697 the eyewitnesses Peter Lehman and Rudolf Hauser reported: "Thereupon a quarrel began, just as if fire had gotten into the straw, with scoldings and insults [by Ammann] like I have hardly ever heard" (*Letters*, 78–79).

ly accused of violating Scripture.¹⁹ In 1700, Ammann and several of his supporters attempted to bridge the divide by proposing to the Reist party a last-ditch exchange. The Ammann party would confess to their rashness, short-temperedness, and uncharitable conduct in the controversy, even temporarily excommunicating themselves as proof of their true repentance, while the Reist party would embrace the practice of shunning excommunicated Anabaptists. Not willing to adopt what they regarded an unchristlike practice, the Reist party kept its distance, and the division between the Amish and the Mennonites continues to this day.²⁰

II. REIST: THE HERMENEUTIC OF DIALOGICAL HARMONIZATION

Reist's interpretation of 1 Cor 5:11 was driven by his conviction that Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, could not have contradicted the accumulated dominical wisdom of Matt 18:15–20, 9:10–13, and 15:11, texts which he saw as linearly packaged together because of the ability of Matthew 9 to answer a question from Matthew 18 and the ability of Matthew 15 to answer a question from Matthew 9. This package was then brought to bear on Reist's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 5. At this juncture, we shall explore Reist's hermeneutic of dialogical harmonization, in which various texts, which may or may not be contextually or historically related, are placed in conversation with each other so as to iron out the apparent disparities between them. Among these texts, sayings and deeds of Jesus hold a privileged position over other biblical passages, as Reist followed the Christocentric outlook on Scripture which proved a staple in most Anabaptist hermeneutics.²¹ In Matt 18:17, Jesus instructed his disciples to treat the sinning church member who refuses to heed the individual, small group, and whole church admonitions "as a pagan or a tax collector." For Reist, this command raised the question: how ought Christians to treat pagans or tax collectors? Reist found the solution in Matt 9:10–13, which reports that Jesus and his disciples ate dinner with "many tax collectors and sinners," actions which Jesus defended on the grounds that tax collectors and sinners were spiritually ill and had an urgent need for the Great Physician.²² Since Christians are those who follow the example of Jesus, Reist concluded that Mennonites must eat with banned church members and offer them forgiveness, as they must be treated like the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus ate and to whom Jesus offered forgiveness (Matt 9:13).²³ But such *imitatio Christi* provoked the further question: are Christians at risk of contracting the impurity of banned church mem-

¹⁹ *Letters*, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

²¹ As William R. Estep explains, "For the Swiss and South German Anabaptists, the final authority for the Christian life and the faith and order of the church was the New Testament, in particular the life and teachings of Christ. While they tended to interpret the Scriptures in a literal sense, they were Christocentric. It was Christ who in the actual formulation of the faith became the ultimate authority to which they appealed" (*The Anabaptist Story* [3rd rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 22).

²² *Letters*, 72–74. Here five supporters of Reist (the ministers Hans-Rudolf Nägeli, Christian Plien, Rudolf Hauser, Peter Lehman, and Christof Dohlen) attest to Reist's observation.

²³ "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

bers by eating with them and engaging in normal social interaction with them? Here Reist turned to Matt 15:11, where Jesus commented that “what goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, this is what defiles them.” As Reist put it, “No sins pass in through the mouth for even Christ ate with tax collectors and sinners.”²⁴ Hence Reist reasoned that imitating the actions of banned church members (“what comes out of their mouth”), and not eating or socially engaging with banned church members, is what causes the faithful to become infected with sin.

With the problem of Matthean interpretation solved, Reist came to 1 Cor 5:11. Lest Paul contradict Jesus and the Bible contain error, this text, despite its *prima facie* reading, could not mean that Christians are to avoid social engagement, even meals, with professed Christians who have fallen into open immorality. Thus, Reist’s commitment to inerrancy drove him to look afresh at the surrounding context in search of a way out. Reist saw that 1 Cor 5:6–8 made reference to the Passover, whose Christian analogue was the Lord’s Supper.²⁵ Reist consequently understood “keep[ing] the Festival” (1 Cor 5:8) as observing the Lord’s Supper, a perception reinforced by Paul’s charge to celebrate the festival because of the sacrifice of Christ, our paschal lamb.²⁶ Like the elimination of physical yeast in the Passover, this Eucharistic celebration was to be free of the spiritual yeast of malice and evil, which must be cleaned out of the whole batch of dough, a batch which Paul identified as the church. Accordingly, the church at the Lord’s Table must be spiritually unleavened. Reist believed that these collective insights constituted the “glove” which perfectly fit the “hand” of 1 Cor 5:11. For now its admonition, “do not even eat with” pseudo-Christians who live unrighteously, indicated not eating the Lord’s Supper with such flagrant hypocrites, whether formally excommunicated or not. Indeed, they comprised the spiritual yeast of wickedness which must be cleaned out of the church before the spiritually unleavened loaf of sincere and honest Christians could validly approach the Lord’s Table.²⁷ On this exegesis, 1 Cor 5:11 desig-

²⁴ *Letters*, 28.

²⁵ “Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

²⁶ *Letters*, 47–48.

²⁷ Jakob Gut nicely spelled out the position of his teacher Reist and the dilemma with Ammann: “I have requested from Jakob Ammann when he reproached us with the passage: ‘you should not eat with these,’ I requested from them that they should prove with the Scriptures that the apostles meant daily meals. Then I would support him. But they could not do this, but instead said: ‘The passage means exactly what it says.’ But this is my understanding. When [Paul] said: I have written you in the letter . . . that you should have nothing to do with fornicators and, in addition, says he did not mean the fornicators of this world. So I understand that the Corinthians [had] thought he meant the world—with those they should not want to have any contact—and the fornicator in the congregation who allowed himself to be called a brother, they also regarded as a brother and was not sorry that he was put out of their midst. Therefore he chided the Corinthians: ‘Don’t you know that a little leaven makes the whole dough yeasty?’ I do not believe that he meant literal yeast, but rather the fornicator who was regarded as a brother, who broke and shared the bread fellowship with him; and through this spiritual yeast everything on Lord’s table was defiled with the devil’s table. For indeed, the church of God cannot partake of both

nated the same thing as 1 Cor 5:8, “Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”: namely, let the church celebrate the Lord’s Supper without the old yeast of wicked pseudo-Christians but only as an unleavened entity containing Christians who manifested the virtues of sincerity and truth. Hence Paul, in 1 Cor 5:11, meant to command Christians not to eat the Eucharist with persons living in blatant sin, including but not limited to those who had been banned by the church.

To sum up, Reist’s exegesis can be expressed by the following syllogism.

1. Matt 18:15–20 orders followers of Jesus to ban from the church persons who fail to repent following its threefold disciplinary procedure.
2. Such persons should be to followers of Jesus like tax collectors.
3. Matt 9:10–13 reveals that Jesus ate ordinary meals with tax collectors and other notorious sinners.
4. Matt 15:11 shows that one cannot contract spiritual impurity by eating.
5. Therefore, followers of Jesus should eat ordinary meals with banned church members and notorious sinners and cannot contract spiritual impurity by so doing.
6. 1 Cor 5:11 orders followers of Jesus not to eat with church members engaging in open sin, including banned church members.
7. Therefore, 1 Cor 5:11 must be ordering followers of Jesus not to eat some special meal other than ordinary meals with church members engaging in open sin.
8. 1 Cor 5:7–8 describes followers of Jesus celebrating the Passover, which symbolically indicated the Lord’s Supper, without the old yeast of malice and evil.
9. Therefore, 1 Cor 5:11 orders followers of Jesus not to eat the Lord’s Supper with church members engaging in open sin, including banned church members.

In the *Statement from Obneheim*, Reist expressed his interpretation with these words:

In our understanding of shunning we do not acknowledge that the apostle in I Corinthians wrote about daily eating but rather of the Passover lamb which is Christ crucified for us. Therefore, let us not observe Easter with the old leaven. Therefore, we acknowledge that those who commit the vices about which the Apostle writes—namely, someone who lets himself be called a brother and is a fornicator, and so forth—that we should excommunicate those who are evil and we should not eat the bread which commemorates the body and blood of Christ with them.²⁸

tables. Therefore, I understand that he spoke to them about this spiritual meal; this they should not eat with him, but rather put out from among them those who are wicked. ... The apostle was speaking of the ban in this chapter and not of shunning” (*Letters*, 51–52).

²⁸ *Letters*, 48.

Reist insisted that anyone who interpreted Paul's words otherwise made Jesus out to be a deceiver and failed to understand the whole of Scripture christocentrically, not realizing that the questions posed by all problematic passages outside the Gospels find their answers in the life and teachings of Jesus.²⁹ One could therefore say that, for Reist, it would be impossible for the commands of Paul, rightly interpreted, to contravene the example of Jesus.

III. AMMANN: THE HERMENEUTIC OF PRIORITIZING THE CLEAR AND SUBORDINATING THE UNCLEAR

Holding to the perspicuity of the major contours of Scripture, Ammann contended that texts which were clear in and of themselves, such as 1 Cor 5:11 and Matt 18:17, meant exactly what they literally implied. It mattered not where in Scripture such texts were found or who wrote them, as all were inspired by the same Holy Spirit.³⁰ Any attempt to read such texts through the lenses of other passages which could be interpreted in more than one way was, in Ammann's words, to argue "indeed with Scripture but without sound arguments."³¹ For Ammann, such an invalid hermeneutical procedure failed to respect the integrity of each individual scriptural assertion in its original context. As regarded 1 Cor 5:11, Ammann insisted that the immediately preceding verses (5:9–10) and succeeding verses (5:12–13) established its plain meaning beyond all doubt. For in 1 Cor 5:9–10, Paul instructed Christians to engage in social interaction with non-Christians who lived an immoral lifestyle: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world." Then Paul's order for Christians not to socially interact with nominal Christians who lived an immoral lifestyle would prove the natural contrast. This contrast between refusing to shun non-Christians and shunning unrighteous nominal Christians was reinforced in 1 Cor 5:12–13: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked person from among you.'" Therefore Ammann declared that, taken on its own merits, 1 Cor 5:9–10 plainly instructed Christians: "You may well have dealings with the fornicators of this world or misers or thieves, namely, in outward eating and drinking. But if there is someone who allows himself to be called a brother and is a fornicator or a miser or a mocker or drunkard or thief, with one like this you should now not eat, namely, physically."³²

Ammann proceeded to assert that his intra-contextual exegesis could be verified by *reductio ad absurdum*. For suppose, Ammann reasoned, that 1 Cor 5:11 did

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰ Hence Ammann held that the teachings of Paul bore just as much authority as the teachings of Jesus, and, if the situation arose, unclear teachings of Jesus ought to be understood through the lenses of clear Pauline texts. However, Ammann did not feel the situation arose in this case because he took Matt 18:17 to plainly affirm the same teaching as 1 Cor 5:11, as we shall discover.

³¹ *Letters*, 31.

³² Ibid., 38.

refer to not sharing the Lord's Table (as opposed to not sharing ordinary or physical meals) with unrighteous nominal Christians. But 1 Cor 5:9–10 indicated that what should not be shared with unrighteous nominal Christians should be shared with non-Christians who lived immorally. In this case, 1 Cor 5:9–10 would entail that Christians should share the Lord's Table with non-Christians who lived immorally, which is patently ridiculous. As Ammann deduced: "For if Saint Paul had meant only the spiritual meals [i.e. communion], as our opponents claim, then he would have had to allow us to eat the spiritual meal with the fornicators of this world."³³ It followed from this that 1 Cor 5:11 commanded Christians not to share ordinary or physical meals with unrighteous nominal Christians and thereby to shun them. On Ammann's assessment, 1 Cor 5:9–13 constituted one distinct thought-unit or pericope (as evidenced by the paragraph separation in critical Greek editions and German translations of the NT) and could only be interpreted by linguistic features within that pericope. Hence the unclear metaphor of keeping the Passover celebration in 1 Cor 5:7–8 could not be used to overturn the clear teaching of 1 Cor 5:9–13. Rather, Ammann maintained as a hermeneutical rule that unclear passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of clear passages of Scripture. Therefore, 1 Cor 5:9–13 should be used to validly interpret 1 Cor 5:7–8, such that celebrating the Passover referred to living the Christian life and discarding the old yeast referred to throwing immoral pseudo-Christians, such as the man who was sleeping with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1), out of the church. Just like yeast would be shunned by Jews during Passover, so immoral pseudo-Christians should be shunned by true Christians.³⁴

This same conclusion followed from Matt 18:17, where Jesus's admonition to treat the banned church member as "a pagan or a tax collector" carried its standard connotation in first-century Jewish society. For a first-century Jew, Gentiles and tax collectors were sworn enemies with whom one had no social interaction. That Jesus carried out an extraordinary divine mission of eating with tax collectors and interacting with Gentiles elsewhere in the Gospels was, for Ammann, simply irrelevant to the ordinary meaning of the admonition in Matt 18:17. Jesus's unique actions could only be relevant if they formed part of the pericope spanning Matt 18:15–20. Speaking on behalf of his faction, Ammann delineated the Amish view of this pericope:

We believe and confess that when someone is completely corrupted, whether because of his evil life or his false doctrine, he is separated from God and also justly separated from the congregation and disciplined, and that this same person—in accordance with the treasure of Christ's teaching and His apostles—must also then be avoided and shunned by all members and those in fellowship with the congregation, especially by those who are aware of such persons,

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

whether in eating or drinking and other similar fellowship without any partiality.³⁵

In Ammann's view, Reist's appeal at this point to Matt 15:11 was doubly invalid. First, it did not form part of the immediate context of Jesus's teaching about church discipline to his disciples and was thus irrelevant to the topic. Second, even taken within its own context, Matt 15:11 did not signify the appropriateness of eating with nominal Christians; rather, it signified the appropriateness of eating all foods, whether kosher or non-kosher, and of eating in any Jewish ritual condition, whether with washed or unwashed hands. As Jesus himself explained the disputed saying in the same pericope: "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ... But eating with unwashed hands does not defile" (Matt 15:17, 20). Accordingly, when Reist appealed to Matt 15:11 in his 1694 *tête-à-tête* with Ammann, the eyewitness Peter Giger reported, "Jakob Ammann said that had no bearing on [shunning] and waved his hand."³⁶

IV. ANALYZING AND LEARNING FROM THE REIST-AMMANN DISAGREEMENT

Both Reist's hermeneutic of dialogical harmonization and Ammann's hermeneutic of prioritizing the clear and subordinating the unclear find widespread allegiance among evangelicals. By way of assessment, Reist treated statements of Scripture as absolute propositional truths which then needed to be arranged in linear fashion, with assertions of or about Jesus at the beginning, using the structure of deductive argument. In this way, biblical truths could be brought into mutual dialogue, thus resulting in new insights which would safeguard the validity of each truth contributing to those insights and keep Christ at their center. This is typically the hermeneutic utilized by systematic theologians, myself included.³⁷ To give a well-known example, each chapter of Wayne Grudem's popular *Systematic Theology* takes passages of Scripture as propositional truths and weaves them together via deductive argument to arrive at comprehensive "biblical doctrine."³⁸ One danger in this approach that Ammann helpfully brings to the fore (and that I believe Grudem largely avoids) is that it can easily devolve into "prooftexting" or taking passages out of context, such that the proposition which a sentence is thought to express is not the proposition which the sentence originally expressed. In that case, any logical argument containing the faulty proposition is unsound. Ammann was thus correct to note that the proposition "One cannot contract spiritual impurity by eating" was not the content of Jesus's statement in Matt 15:11, although his statement tak-

³⁵ Ibid., 38.

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

³⁷ As evidenced by my treatment of predestination and human freedom, the Trinity, Christology, and several other topics in Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

³⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

en in isolation would tend toward that misimpression. Rather, the full context of Matt 15:1–20 discloses that Matt 15:11 originally conveyed the proposition “One cannot contract spiritual impurity by eating nonkosher foods or with unwashed hands.” Hence Christians should heed Ammann’s counsel of the need for verifying the alleged proposition that any biblical statement conveys against a thorough study of the larger context in which that statement appears.

A second danger in dialogical harmonization that Ammann highlights is that some statements of Scripture, even taken in context, do not express absolute propositional truths but rather report behavior in particular situations which cannot be generalized to cover all situations. Thus, Jesus’s eating with tax collectors and other notorious sinners in Matt 9:10–13 does not entail the absolute propositional truth “Followers of Jesus must eat with notorious sinners.” For 1 Corinthians 5 apparently indicates that there are at least some notorious sinners—namely, professed believers living in flagrant sin—with whom followers of Jesus cannot eat. Accordingly, systematic theologians must be careful to ensure that contextually examined biblical statements which describe behavior particular to a given social situation (like the “kiss of love” in 1 Pet 5:14) are not universalized into absolute propositional truths dictating ethics and doctrine. Only contextually examined biblical statements which themselves dictate ethical and doctrinal absolutes may be universalized and utilized in deductive argument.

Turning to an assessment of Ammann’s hermeneutic, its subordination of unclear biblical statements to clear statements threatens to alter or ignore the true meaning of the unclear statements and to hide any real disagreement between the unclear and clear statements. To label Jesus’s eating with tax collectors in Matt 9:10–13 as unclear while deeming Matt 18:17 and 1 Cor 5:11 clear seems to disregard the obvious import of Matt 9:10–13 on Matt 18:17. It is implausible to suppose that Jesus did not have how he himself treated tax collectors in mind when telling his disciples to treat banned members of the church as tax collectors. Perhaps Jesus in c. AD 30 would have therefore advocated eating and socially interacting with banned members of the church and so held a less rigorist position than Paul in c. AD 55. And perhaps we ought not to treat this disagreement as a contradiction in Scripture but as a presentation of two divergent viewpoints, each inspired by the Holy Spirit, forming two options or even two poles on a spectrum from which Christians are free to choose amidst their particular situations. This suggests that there is no “one size fits all” method for disciplining banned church members, but that the Christian must be receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in selecting between the options or within the range of options.³⁹ Reist seems to have been correct that eating with such banned persons was consistent with the example of Jesus and therefore constituted a legitimate choice. Here biblical and narrative theologians should heed the warning not to get so wrapped up in the text under their investigation, as Ammann did with 1 Cor 5:9–13, that they lay it down as the offi-

³⁹ To generalize from this particular insight, one does not then need to choose whether the teaching of Jesus or the teaching of Paul is more authoritative on any given matter.

cial position on a particular matter without first consulting the other scriptural pericopes touching on that matter. Furthermore, Christians in general should learn that disagreement in Scripture on a particular matter does not necessarily compromise inerrancy.

By way of conclusion, let us step back historically to examine the significance of the Amish Division. By publicly taking a stand against shunning, Reist could without significant exaggeration be styled the spiritual father of all non-separatist Mennonites and arguably the leading seventeenth-century Anabaptist theologian.⁴⁰ Reist opened up the lines of communication between the Swiss Brethren and their sympathetic Reformed neighbors who offered them support in times of persecution, whom they lovingly dubbed the *Treuberszige* (Truehearted).⁴¹ Even though the *Treuberszige* had not submitted to believers' baptism or threefold Matthean church discipline, Reist was the first Anabaptist to officially recognize their salvation (or, indeed, the salvation of anyone else outside the Anabaptist fold).⁴² For, asserted Reist, Jesus had declared in Luke 9:50 that "whoever is not against you is for you."⁴³ Reist's initial acknowledgment that non-Anabaptists could be saved proved a significant step forward for the Swiss Brethren movement, launching a trajectory of cooperation with other Christian groups which led three centuries later to several German Mennonites participating in the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence (2001–2010) and to national Mennonite conferences in the Netherlands and north Germany joining the World Council of Churches. But it is doubtful that Reist would have approved of joining the WCC, given the fact that many member churches of the WCC do not subscribe to inerrancy but hold to more liberal views of the Bible that Reist found unpalatable.

On the other hand, Ammann reinvigorated the separatist trajectory rooted in the *Schleitheim Confession*, emphasizing Anabaptist purity over what he perceived as unity at all costs. After Ammann's death, the Amish movement evolved from separatism (i.e. refusing to worship with outsiders) to insularity (i.e. showing great reluctance to socially engage with outsiders), to the point where it no longer engaged in evangelism.⁴⁴ However, this outcome Ammann would have rejected as utterly opposed to his core twofold passion—first, the preservation of a Pauline, "tough-love" style of discipline inside the church so as to maintain true discipleship while, second, fostering friendly and compassionate social relationships with non-

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, Reist's contributions often go unappreciated because he left scarcely any literary legacy, with only a jointly composed document and a written prayer to his credit; most of what is known about Reist comes from accounts recorded by his contemporaries, many of whom were hostile.

⁴¹ *Letters*, 3.

⁴² Regarding the *Treuberszige* Reist prayed: "And we ask You, Holy Father, for all people who do much good to us with food and drink, with house and shelter, showing and proving great love and faithfulness to us. Lord God, be their rich rewarder here in this temporal life *and in eternal life!*" (*Letters*, 147–48; italics added).

⁴³ Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949), 185; John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), 394–97.

⁴⁴ Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 21–23, 47–49.

Christians in the world so as to bring them into Christ's church via believers' baptism. In our largely indulgent Western culture, one could certainly make the case, admittedly controversial, that it is to Ammann's style of discipline and evangelism that many North American churches must return to set their own houses in order.