Why the Amish Sing

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half-hour before the 8:30 AM worship service, I meet the bishop and his wife at their home. Since the Ohio summer temperature has already climbed to the mid-80s, we decide to ride in my car rather than walk the half-mile uphill. I park under a ten-year-old Norway maple tree, hoping to garner a bit of shade from the blazing August sun. The men are gathering in the barn; the women, in an attached concrete-block workshop. The host family has scrubbed both buildings spit-shine clean in preparation for the services.

The bishop’s wife walks with me into the workshop. She places a brief kiss on the lips of all of the women except me and another visitor, and the women converse among themselves. After a few minutes, Erma consults a large clock on the wall. “I wonder if Sarah and Ida are coming,” she muses, adding as an aside to me, “They’re sisters who come together.” These are the oldest women of the district, and usually they would lead the line of
women who arrange themselves in the seats on one side of the room. Erma decides to go ahead, and she motions me to walk with the older women to take one of seven cushioned seats. I demur, but she insists. Within the hour, I realize the gift of the seat back, and three hours later, I will be deliriously happy to have soft padding.

The rest of the women line up and walk to backless wooden benches. In parallel lines, the men and boys organize themselves and process to the benches on the opposite side. The leaders, all males, and the rest of the older men sit facing each other in the two rows nearest the oldest women with the first row of women looking at the backs of one row of men. When he is reading Scripture or preaching, the minister will stand between the two facing rows of men (figure 8.1). The youngest boys sit in the back row and throughout the service duck out to check on the horses stabled in the barn. In all, forty-five people have assembled.

The service begins with a song, Scripture reading, and then two more songs. During the second of the three songs, the ministers and bishop leave and form the Abrot, or ministers’ council. In this session, they give instruction to two teenagers seeking to join the church and plan who will lead in worship and who will preach each of the two sermons. When they return, one of the ministers preaches a half-hour sermon, after which the congregation rises, turns to face the chairs, and kneels directly on the concrete floor for prayer.

The tone of the service is reverent but relaxed. The host family provides crackers or cookies for the young children, who are expected to sit quietly through the three-hour service. Children work their way between the women’s side of the gathering and the men’s, watching, listening, and seeking comfort, as at ease with their fathers as with their mothers. A breastfeeding mother takes her baby to a separate room to feed him; when the infant falls asleep, the mother lays him on a bed and returns to worship.

Another song follows the kneeling prayer, during which people who need a break slip out and return in time for a second minister to preach the longer sermon. That begins just before 11:00 AM and lasts an hour and a half. At the end of this sermon, the preachers ask for testimonies from men in the gathering. Will anyone confirm that today’s messages have been true to the Word of God? Two men give witness to the sermons’ veracity and importance, elaborating briefly the themes of the messages. A final song rounds out the meeting, and the congregants file out in reverse order.
Unhurriedly, the members cross the yard and enter the lower level of the house where our hosts will serve lunch. Built into a hill, the lower level offers a bright, large basement meeting room with white concrete block walls. There are a dozen tables set with flatware, two cups, napkins, and a plate for each place. The men and the women have tables on opposite sides of the room. There are plenty of tables, so everyone but the servers sit at one time to eat together. Matching yellow plastic cafeteria trays placed between every four people offer stacks of sliced turkey, ham, Swiss and American cheeses, homemade white and wheat bread, butter, peanut butter spread, pickled beets, and pickles. Young girls circulate pitchers of lemonade, tea, and water. Next, they pass trays of assorted handmade cookies. If one round isn’t enough, the servers return to offer a second helping and follow with more Styrofoam cups and insulated pitchers of coffee.

After the substantial but simple meal, women and men, segregated in worship and at mealtime, socialize separately on porch swings set on the broad two-storied verandas. Men gather on the lower patio and women on the upper, while the teen girls finish the dishes. We visit and laugh. I feel a little like a long-lost cousin at a family reunion, welcomed into the group but trying to figure out who is who. The children nap in an upstairs
bedroom, sit quietly among the parents, or go off to play with older siblings. Some teens head out to complete chores before the evening singing. A couple of boys ask permission to go swimming. After a while, two families begin gathering up children and hitching up buggies. My friends will go home later, so I thank the women for their kindness in including me in their circle and excuse myself.

The Meaning of Amish Worship

Singing occupies a critical space in Amish worship life. During worship services, the Amish spend two hours listening to sermons, an hour singing, and only a few minutes praying. Singing reinforces the messages of the Scripture reading and the sermonizing. Because of its reliance on the Ausbund, worship singing also serves to connect contemporary Amish believers with the martyrs who went before them. It helps them recognize and admit the parts of themselves that are still unredeemed and in need of transformation, as well as extol the wonders of God’s grace toward sinful humans. Singing is cut from the same cloth as the rest of the Amish worship experience, which centers on praise and instruction, admonitions and encouragement.

From childhood to adulthood, Amish people have heard hundreds of hours of meditations on biblical themes from the fall (Adam and Eve’s disobedience, which led to their expulsion from Eden) to human redemption (by faith in Jesus’s self-sacrifice on the cross, reliance on God’s Word, and separation from the world). The annually published schedule of Scripture readings sets the topics for preaching. For example, once a year the preaching centers on liberty or Freiheit, based on John 8 and Galatians 5; another time, the sermon is on the end of the world after Jesus returns, based on Matthew 24 and 25. Amish area bookstores and businesses make the schedule available for about a dollar.

The locus of Amish worship is actually the home, which is consistently seen as the proper place for nurturing children in the faith. Families are strongly encouraged to set aside a time each morning for Scripture reading and prayer. Couples work together to raise a godly family, but the Amish husband leads the family as the head of the household. Because worship of God holds a solemn place in the lives of the Amish, the family as the primary socializing force for Amish children must uphold its role in nurturing their love of God through worship at home. Families do not neces-
sarily have a prescribed list of Scripture to use. While many New Order families use spontaneous prayers in family worship, Old Order families often choose to use printed prayers from the Christenpflicht, a family prayer book first printed in America in 1745 for devotional reading. Some families order devotionals, such as one called Beside the Still Waters; others decide to read a chapter of the Bible each day, following this with prayer and singing.

In terms of Sunday worship, then, each Amish district holds worship services every other week in members’ homes. In Holmes County, the communing districts (groups that agree on what are considered the “essentials” of faith) divide themselves into A and B groups. All the A groups hold church on one Sunday and the B groups on the following Sunday. On the opposite weeks, members may visit in each other’s homes or visit a neighboring service in their area. Because of this schedule, ministers may preach in each other’s districts, lending variety in style and substance to reach listeners’ hearts in new ways. The Amish do not generally hold extra services on Sunday or Wednesday nights, although the New Order Amish now hold Sunday school sessions on Sundays when worship services are not held. In those sessions, studying the Bible and cementing friendships go hand in hand.

A New Order man explains the meaning of worship to me this way: “Giving yourself to all the Christian people in fellowship is the purpose of worship. We can’t be Christians in isolation.” His wife adds, “We are in a fold. The others care about you. Worship is a shelter or protection.”

We now turn to the role of singing in Amish worship, beginning with the song-like pulpit intonations of Amish ministers and moving to the content and qualities of the Ausbund, the hymnal used in Amish worship services.

The Pulpit Intonation

The Amish came to Ohio at the turn of the nineteenth century during the Second Great Awakening, a period in which utopian community life was expanding in Ohio. The Shakers, Owenites, Fourierists, and Mormons, to name only the most prominent, established communities from Kirtland to Cincinnati. The new state of Ohio offered rich, affordable land and a measure of freedom for experimentation. It is difficult to know the extent of Amish awareness of these movements, but one aspect of the Second
Great Awakening that seems to have influenced the Amish is the preaching style. The singing and whooping chants of white and black preachers of this time mixed and mingled in the camp revivals, bringing a new texture to staid, organized religion.\(^2\)

While preaching itself holds the primary position in more progressive Amish orders, another important element of every service is the reading of Scripture. Most ministers now preach and pray in Pennsylvania Dutch but still read the Scriptures in High German. Swartzentruber services center on Scripture reading. “There is not much of a sermon,” one Swartzentruber man notes. “There is no English in the service, and the ministers just stand and read a lot of Scripture in High German.”\(^3\) Their reasoning centers on their conviction that each believer should receive a message directly from God, not moderated by a human.

To present biblical passages, the preacher may use a pulpit intonation—a kind of sing-song recitative. Most of the notes the minister sings are on the same pitch. He enhances the monotone by leaping from a low note to the pulpit tone at the beginning, stepping up one note and back to the pulpit tone at the end of the phrase, and slowing to allow the congregation time to think about his words (Musical Example 8.1). The minister sings one octave lower than transcribed in the example as he intones the scripture passage, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall want for nothing.” It sounds like the intense rise and fall of a livestock auctioneer or the preaching style of the rural southern white or African American Baptist preacher.

The preacher intones rapidly. The pitch rises to underline important words, putting lively musical emphasis on specific syllables of biblical text. Upper and lower neighboring tones of a whole-step higher (C-sharp) and a half-step lower (A-sharp) encircle the primary tone, a B-natural. Preachers in Pennsylvania are more likely to use the pulpit intonation today than in Ohio. They add another musical way of inviting worshippers to hear the Word of God.
History of the *Ausbund*

It is impossible to describe Amish worship singing without examining the history, contents, and other qualities of the *Ausbund*. The origins of the *Ausbund* are rather sketchy, because its collection developed under what has been called a “shroud of secrecy” to protect its compilers. Notations in the margins of some copies of the hymnbook attribute hymns to leaders of other Protestant groups; for example, hymn 38, “ascribed to John Huss who was burned at the stake in 1415.” But between 1537 and 1540, Anabaptist martyrs wrote the nucleus of the hymns—fifty-one, to be exact. One *Ausbund* introduction proclaims, “The following are several other very beautiful hymns composed and sung by the Swiss Brethren in the dungeon of the castle at Passau” where they were incarcerated in southwestern Germany in 1537. They wrote these while awaiting their deaths by hanging, drowning, and burning. These “‘Klagelieder’ [an elegy or complaint] lament their persecution and express love for their persecutors.”

With a full 45 stanzas, one of the hymns recounts how a hangman resigned his post rather than participate in an Anabaptist execution, because he admired them. Another *Ausbund* song celebrates the sixteenth-century martyrdom of Elizabeth, a pure, single girl who, although severely tortured, did not recant, only cried out to God. When they were finished with her interrogation, Elizabeth’s tormentors drowned her.

In “The Old Order Amish, Their Hymns and Hymn Tunes,” English professor John Umble notes that the Anabaptists circulated broadsides, posters tacked to doors for publicizing the message, and later gathered two collections, each of more than fifty hymns. Leaders joined the two collections in 1564 (table 8.1). The larger of the two collections became hymns 3–80; the other collection included what are hymns 81–130 of today’s *Ausbund*. Actually, the second set contains the hymns written by the early martyrs. Later Anabaptist publications inserted ten more hymns, including hymn 132, which commemorates the martyrdom of Hans Landis in 1614. In 1571, officials confiscated copies of this forbidden, “heretical,” and “dangerous song book” and punished anyone they caught with it. Officials in Bern, Switzerland continued to ban the *Ausbund* for more than one hundred years.
By 1622, adherents to the Anabaptist family had codified the *Ausbund*, producing multiple European editions. Christopher Sauer published the first American edition in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1742. This edition contained the original 140 hymns in the main body and 5 additional in an appendix. Liebert and Billymyer’s edition in 1785 added one hymn in an appendix. Other American publishers included Joseph Ehrenfried in 1815, Johann Bär and Sons in 1834, and the Mennonite Publishing House in 1880. Publishers continue to reprint the book.

Both the Mennonites and the Amish used the *Ausbund* in the United States until the early nineteenth century. Then, the Mennonites started compiling new hymnals in English and German. The Amish, however, rely on the *Ausbund* even today for worship singing. A few have chosen to sing only the *Ausbund* songs that have been printed in the *Liedersammlung* to eliminate the need for buying two hymnbooks. But most Amish groups employ the *Ausbund* itself in worship.

### Table 8.1 Chronology of the *Ausbund*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European editions</th>
<th>Hymns</th>
<th>Hymn authors (number)</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Place of publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1524</td>
<td>First Anabaptist martyr ballads, hymns 81–130</td>
<td>Hans Koch, Leonhart Meister</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Printed individually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1564</td>
<td>53 hymns, hymns 3–80</td>
<td>Passau martyrs (51)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1583</td>
<td>First <em>Ausbund</em> edition: 130 hymns, combines two collections, hymns 3–80 and 81–130 (in current edition)</td>
<td>Swiss Brethren (100), Dutch (11), North German (11), Bohemian Brethren (5), Hutterites (“several”)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>von Mechel brothers</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Texts of the *Ausbund*

The hymn-writing Swiss Brethren wrote the poems of the *Ausbund* to implore members to faithfully endure the persecution frequent in those times. They also wrote to praise God and to elaborate on the doctrines, such as the belief in salvation through grace, evident in forsaking all sin, and practices—such as footwashing during communion celebrations—that they had adopted as normative. Through these hymn texts, they could establish their faith and indoctrinate new members into it.

John Umble, in the article mentioned earlier, describes in depth the contents of the hymns. Some hymns are devotional. Other hymns teach religious doctrines of freedom of religious choice and the law of love of neighbor. Some celebrate the personal qualities of friendliness, forgiveness, patience, and sadness at the evil in the world. The first song in the *Ausbund*, “Obgleich die Harf,” gives directions for the proper spiritual attitude during singing. The writer urges, “Christians shall in spirit and truth, sing, pray, and sing psalms”:

> Although the harp is good and sharp,  
> That rings in the ears,  
> Still there is no proper sound unless it is tuned,  
> No string gives its right sound  
> If one does not strike it rightly,  
> With free improvisation, according to the fingering chart,  
> And on the appropriate frets.  

Worship songs like *Ausbund* 770—“O Gott Vater, wir loben Dich,” a praise hymn sung during every worship service—focus on the crucial message of living “in righteousness.” We will examine this hymn, which the Amish call the *Loblied* or *Lobsang*, in much more detail in chapter 10. Other song texts exhort:

> The first gift . . . is godly fear / . . . It trembles by God’s word, / and enters through the strait gate; / . . . The second gift is goodness which prepares man to love his neighbor heartily (*Ausbund* 275).  
> Help us out of sin’s affliction / . . . Let us not stray from Thee / and no more be like the world (*Ausbund* 408).
Christ the Lord presents to us the doctrine, the same informs us: work repentence, follow my footsteps, and shun all sin (Ausbund 481).

Show yourself obedient, turn away from evil. . . . Death has no difference between old and young. If you do not keep yourself in the right, it will be to your sorrow (Ausbund 242).

All you Christians who are yielded to God, Press here and sing with rich sound and with zeal (Ausbund 530).

Nothing is sweeter than Christ’s yoke (Ausbund 180).

Some Ausbund hymn texts criticize other Protestant movements, like that of Luther, while setting the norms for Anabaptist life. Personal holiness, they claim, is the test of faith. In Ausbund hymn 94, verses 21 and 22, Riall and Peters write that the Anabaptists “put the whole Wittenberg [Lutheran] movement into question by its failure to produce holiness.”

True Christians are of this kind, who live this way and who bury all fleshly desires with Christ, who are led by God’s Spirit to the host of angels so that they touch no evil. He will protect them from sin.

Now I will tell further also about the Church of Sin, which boasts much with words how they are good Christians. They all say they believe, but with their deeds they certainly deny it. I consider it illusion.

Amish writers have also tried to identify, based on their texts, Ausbund hymns borrowed from medieval folksongs. For example, Ausbund 70 resembles a fifteenth-century song starting with the same lines:

Text of Ausbund 70:
Fröhlich so will ich singen,
Mit Lust ein Tageweiß,
Von wunderlichen Dingen,
Dem höchsten Gott zu Preiss,
In seinem Namen heb ich an,
Sein Gnad woll er mir günen,
So g’lingt mirs auf der Bahn.

Medieval Folksong:
Fröhlich so will ich singen,
Mit Lust ein Tageweiß,
Ich hoff, mir sol gelingen,
Darauf leg ich mein Fleiss,
Gegen einem Frewlein reich,
Auf einer Burg so hoch.

This comparison shows that at least some Ausbund texts derive from the lyrics of secular songs of the time, which writers molded into texts appro-
appropriate for and conducive to worship. Amish people agree that some of the tunes they use for Ausbund hymns also came from those folksongs.

Ausbund Tunes

Since no copies of the Ausbund include musical notes, and since, of course, there are no recordings of Amish tunes from the sixteenth century, the evolution of the tunes of the Ausbund proves much more difficult to ascertain than the evolution of the texts. The tunes were actually of little importance to the Anabaptists; they functioned only to enhance the words and to make them easier to remember.

In his book *Four Hundred Years with the Ausbund*, Paul Yoder cites Joseph W. Yoder and George Pullen Jackson’s research to assert that the Ausbund tunes include secular folk tunes “familiar to all of the singers,” sixteenth-century chorale melodies taken from Gregorian chants, sacred folksongs, and those composed for use both in the Roman Catholic church and by the followers of Reformation leader John Calvin. These researchers conclude that “many of the tunes first adopted for use in the Ausbund are still used today.” The Amish have added many embellishments to the tunes, probably during the nineteenth century. Lacking a director, the group singing caused each tune to be “dragged out, which led to many kinds of strange ornamentation, which were foreign to the original tune,”Ausbund researcher Paul Yoder explains.

According to Rudolf Wolkan, who studied Anabaptist hymns in 1903, “Only three [tunes are] thought to be original tunes by Anabaptist composers”: Georg Wagner, Wolff Gernold, and Ludwig Hätzer. For texts that could not be sung to those tunes, the Anabaptists borrowed well-known folk tunes or religious melodies, many of which were written by priest-reformer Martin Luther, such as “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott.” The Ausbund lists eighty-two tune names, fifty-six of which have been identified by Wolkan, including twenty-six spiritual songs and thirty folk tunes.

The tune of the song about the young martyr Elizabeth, mentioned earlier, is known as “Magdelein.” It actually serves as the tune for several Ausbund hymns, including the favorite of an Old Order Amish woman with whom I spoke (Musical Example 8.2).

In the first phrase, the beauty of the melody stems from the swell of the four-note rise on “O” (at A) to the three-note rise on “Schöp-” (at B) and the
gentle fall as the melody rounds out each phrase in a sequence from “Hei-” (at C) repeated on “-ger” (at D) to “Geist” (at E). The melody peaks on the second note of the second phrase, rising from G-sharp to A, and then recedes to the opening B. Interestingly, this melody never uses a D but skips over that note each time.

Singing Ausbund tunes is not easy. Many of the syllables of text have five or more notes. Musicians call the melody melismatic when three or more notes are sung for one syllable of text. One song, “O Vater, steh uns gnädig bei,” has seventeen syllables sung with four notes each, three with five notes, three with six notes, and seven with seven notes. Because the group sings all of these in unison, this takes substantial concentration and practice.

All Ausbund songs proceed at a very slow pace. The Amish explain the speed as a change the early Anabaptists made when other prisoners danced to their singing. Because they believed that dancing was not an appropriate activity, slowing their singing down made the tune impossible to dance to. In some ways, the speed allows beginners to join in tentatively and, over many Sundays, learn where the tune goes.

Another factor that makes the Ausbund tunes difficult is the wide vocal range of many of the hymns. For congregational singing in Christian denominations, most hymns span an octave or less. For example, the familiar Christmas song “Joy to the World” spans one octave. If it is started at high C and falls to middle C, most singers can comfortably sing all eight notes. By contrast, think of the many times individuals and groups have
failed to sing many of the notes of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” a tune that spans an octave and a fifth, 12 notes! A survey of the tunes from Wayne and Holmes counties collected by Ben Troyer, Jr., shows that almost three times as many tunes span an octave or greater as those of less than an octave. This means that some voices will have to strain—or practice regularly to stretch their vocal chords—in order to reach all the notes.

Rehearsing the Old Tunes

Musicologists writing in the mid-twentieth century remarked that, when they attended worship gatherings, it was not unusual for the Amish to stop in the middle of the service for a singing practice. The fear that the old melodies will be lost continues, but today there are few worship gathering rehearsals. Instead, the practices take the shape of men’s gatherings several days before worship services. One man says he meets with a group about once a month during the winter, when the men’s outdoor workload is lighter. In another district, New Order Amishman Atlee Miller explains, “We do not have men’s sings. All the married men in our district are Vorsingers but one. He says he will learn them. I know the Old Order Amish men in Holmes County gather on the Friday nights before worship Sunday every other week when they are available.”

At these sings, the men rehearse the hymns they will sing on subsequent Sundays and review the more commonly sung Ausbund tunes, repeating difficult lines over and over until everyone gets them right. Older men judge when a younger man has gained the proficiency and confidence to lead a certain song. On Sunday morning, a Vorsinger will give the younger man—a teenager even—the nod and that young man will spontaneously lead the singing, with support if necessary.

Even with all these efforts, supplemental notes sneak in. John Umble quotes Goshen College professor Walter E. Yoder: “When one hears an Amish congregation sing these tunes, he notes that there is freedom in the interpretation of the melody. One hears passing notes and embellishments in some voices, not all. This practice, no doubt, is a carry-over from the ancient method of singing plainsong chants.” Yoder sees freedom, not conformity. Sometimes others in the congregation pick up these added notes, and they become standardized into the community singing.

A group of Amish in Holmes County has finished the second in a pair of translations of Ausbund hymns from German to English to promote greater
understanding of the meanings behind these hymns. These translators agree with Amish scholar Umble that “singing probably did more to make the Reformation a popular movement than did the reading of the New Testament.”

The martyrs wrote to encourage their children and friends to stay true to their convictions despite cruel, torturous persecutions, loss of life and home, and exile. Moreover, singing the *Ausbund* hymns helps the Amish to maintain their identity and buttresses the Amish community.

Amish life revolves around praise and worship, and the *Ausbund* furnishes the songs for worship. Children and youth attend worship services throughout their childhood and teen years. In their late teens or into their twenties, the youth must decide for themselves whether they will commit themselves to God in baptism and become full-fledged, voting, and communing adult members of their districts or whether they will choose the wide road. Next, we will discuss the songs of belonging sung in the services in which the Amish receive new members and celebrate communion, a commemorative service based on Jesus’s Last Supper.