



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Technological Prudence:
What the Amish Can
Teach Us
(*Virtual Lives*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Putting Ourselves Out
There: Making Our
Virtual Lives Virtuous
(*Virtual Lives*, pp. 78-81)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Technological Prudence: What the Amish Can Teach Us

The Amish have managed for a century to keep phone technology in check to foster a sense of community that we yearn for in our electronically tethered and frenetically paced lives. How might we leverage this power of the air and subject it to the purposes of God's kingdom?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 3 John 1:13-15

Meditation[†]

And so the question of the desirability of adopting any technological innovation is a question with two possible answers – not one, as has been commonly assumed. If one's motives are money, ease, and haste to arrive in a technologically determined future, then the answer is foregone, and there is, in fact, no question, and no thought. If one's motive is the love of family, community, country, and God, then one will have to think, and one may have to decide that the proposed innovation is undesirable.

Wendell Berry

Reflection

Sometimes when we are sharing with friends words of encouragement (or correction), we experience what John expresses: "I would rather not write with pen and ink" but prefer to "talk together face to face" (3 John 1:13-14). Well, maybe not that detail about "write with pen and ink." But we realize that our email, text message, or even phone conversation is a very inadequate medium to convey our thought and emotion, which leaves us feeling more disconnected than connected.

Reflecting on the varied ways the Amish have grappled for years to make telephones serve their communities rather than sever them, Kevin Miller wonders what we might learn from their efforts. The Amish show "a steadfast determination to make technology fit what anthropologists call relational time," he notes. They slow down for *kairos* time – to enjoy the meaning of life and appreciate its divine narrative structure – rather than obey *chronos* time that measures efficiency by the clock. Miller concludes, "the less *kairos* wholeness that we experience in our relationships and schedules and the more we are in tutelage to the god *chronos* (and its cousin mammon), the more our life stories feel plot-less, which is to say, pointless."

We must not fall "into a common false dichotomy – to either romanticize as ideal, or dismiss as hopelessly compromised, the accommodation... Amish communities have struck with modern technologies like the telephone in all its permutations," Miller warns. "A more fruitful line of conversation begins by asking what we moderns might learn from the Amish and their attempts to control technology, and then re-contextualize those principles for our habitus." Thus he reviews the "Amish values and positions" identified by sociologist Donald Kraybill "that have allowed them to control technology rather than letting it control them." Unlike moderns, the Amish:



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- ▶ *keep birth, work, play, education, worship, friendship, and death in (or close to) the home* and do not create separate institutions for these.
- ▶ *emphasize commonality* in dress and patterns of daily life.
- ▶ *nurture “local, enduring, and stable” relationships* and resist the discontinuity in modern social life.
- ▶ *order their church districts as loose federations and shun artificial approaches to planning families or careers.* They avoid the tendency in “highly rationalized and future-oriented modernity” to control “physical and social relationships through hierarchical bureaucracies.”
- ▶ *free individuals from choice* by following an *Ordnung* (an oral tradition of community rules and practices) and making exceptional choices together by congregational discernment. Kraybill says the Amish try to maintain “the predictability that undergirds traditional cultures, which are regulated by seasonal routines, customary norms, and fatalistic views.”

“These principles are abstract enough to allow for varied applications, not only within plain communities but also modernist ones,” Miller concludes. He sees hopeful “signs of our own worldly *Ordnung* forming to protect our online identity and humanity in its more meaningful, narrative forms.”

Study Questions

1. How have various Amish groups used telephones since their invention? Discuss Kevin Miller’s observation that “Flexible traditionalism, as opposed to a rigid dogmatism, kept their traditions and communities alive and pliable.”
2. Of the Amish values that Donald Kraybill identifies, which do you admire most? Which would you question or modify?
3. How do smartphones lure us into lives that are structured by *chronos* time? How might we tame them to enjoy *kairos* time?
4. For Amy Grizzle Kane, how can online social media threaten community? What response might we learn from the Amish?

Departing Hymn: “Full of Love and Christian Virtue”

Full of love and Christian virtue, may God’s people always be living out the new creation with faith, hope, and charity, prudence to discern the truth, justice to give all their due, fortitude to conquer fear, temperance toward earthly goods.

In a world that’s ever-changing, you, O God, are constant still. Help us in each age and season, your high purpose to fulfill: dare us to embrace new boundaries, grounded in your liberty; teach us how to be good neighbors, building true community.

Let us be a mindful people, walking in the way of Christ; keep us from the base and shallow of a merely virtual life. Meet us in our work and worship, at the table, with our friends; usher us to life abundant with your love that never ends.

Ann Bell Worley (2010)

Tune: RUSTINGTON

† Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body and the Machine,” in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 188.

Technological Prudence: What the Amish Can Teach Us

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the remarkable variety of responses by Amish communities to the telephone.
2. To distinguish *kairos* time from *chronos* time in our relationships, and explore how these modes of time are expressed in how we use communication technologies.
3. To explore what the Amish can teach us about leveraging communication technologies to serve the just and good purposes of God's kingdom.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Virtual Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"Nathan Yoder, an Amish farmer in his thirties near Grantsville, Maryland, milks cows and drives a horse and buggy," Kevin Miller writes. "He does not own a car, a computer, or a cell phone. But he does own a tractor for some operations, shares a landline telephone with two other nearby Amish families (located two walking minutes from his house), and even hires an 'English' neighbor with a van to 'hull' his young family to other states to visit relatives and friends." In his article Miller seeks the logic behind his apparently "selective use of technology [that] can seem maddeningly inconsistent to outsiders."

Part of Miller's interest is personal: "Nathan Yoder is my third cousin," he notes. But he also recognizes "Whatever the apparent inconsistencies, the Amish have managed to keep technology in check, and in doing so they have fostered a sense of community that many of us yearn for in our electronically tethered and frenetically paced lives." (*Virtual Lives*, 20).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members discern how to use new communication technologies for the just and good purposes of God's kingdom.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 3 John 1:13-15 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion explores technological prudence—which is guiding our virtual lives through wise choices about how to use technology for just and good purposes of God's kingdom—by sifting through how one

Christian tradition, the Amish, have used telephones. (The more than 200,000 Amish in North America live in close-knit communities that trace their heritage to the leadership of Jacob Ammon, who divided from Swiss Mennonites in 1693. The Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online [www.gameo.org] and the Young Center's Amish Studies website [www2.etown.edu/amishstudies] are trustworthy sources of information about the Amish.) Kevin Miller, whose ancestors were Amish, wonders "Given the huge cultural and religious gap between these pre-moderns and us postmoderns, what of true relevance can be learned from them in our ultra-wired lives?" In the end, he suggests, quite a lot.

Study Questions

1. While some Amish were early adopters in 1891 of the telephone (creating the Conestoga Telegraph and Telegraph Company by 1902), their communities have never been uncritical of its temptations and abuses. Kevin Miller briefly outlines how various Amish groups have used the telephone. (1) The Old Order Amish banned phones in 1910, but by 1950 had changed their Ordnung to allow families to share a landline phone, if it was located away from the house. Cell phones are used today when needed – e.g., by tradesmen for business, or by the elderly for access to 911 emergency services. (2) The New Order Amish from their beginning in the 1960s allowed members to have phones in their homes. (3) Old Order Mennonites – horse-and-buggy Mennonites, but direct descendents in the Menno Simons line and not from the Jacob Ammon tradition – prohibited only ministers from owning phones, but this restriction was lifted in the 1990s in most communities.

Encourage members to think about the reasons behind these various rules. How would they distinguish "flexible traditionalism" from "rigid dogmatism"?

2. Kevin Miller predicts that we will find the commonality of dress and patterns of life, and the freeing of individuals from choice (which run counter to the pluralist and individualist ethos of modern society) to be the most difficult Amish values to understand and embrace. Nevertheless, members may share their experiences of working in organizations, living among friends, or belonging to groups where similar values were welcome.

Divide members into groups to select one of the values and brainstorm how it might reshape their use of smartphones, computers, and similar communication technologies.

3. Miller says "Cell phones and laptops and iPads, and the very mobility of these devices – the constancy and immediacy of their demand for our attention and their parasitic attendance on our very persons" quickly draw us into "the tutelage to the god *chronos* (and its cousin *mammon*)" and "leave us feeling lost in the moral topography of our lives. We do not feel Sabbath or shalom or whole."

Yet he commends the prudent use of phones by the Old Amish and of Facebook by his grandmother to stay in touch with family members. He notes, "Cell phones have been used to photograph and instantly transmit abuses by police in Iranian street protests. In developing countries, poor people employ cell phones to gain information and as a form of currency for the first time. Social networking sites are being used to connect grandmas with their families and to organize for the good. These are indicators of how the modern permutations of the telephone can foster not alienation, but community." Amy Grizzle Kane agrees that "Online social media can be a wonderful resource to stay connected with friends and family across the miles. Those who travel overseas for business, missionary work, or military service can stay in touch with loved ones in wonderful and life-giving ways. Church families are tweeting and blogging about the ways God is at work in the life of their congregation and community. Senior and young adults alike are using e-book readers to read several versions of the Bible on one device that makes the print as large as readers need it to be."

4. Amy Grizzle Kane is concerned about using online social media to air grievances, gossip, and cyber-bully others. When these activities are done anonymously, they can become especially vicious. Often they are done quickly and carelessly. Brainstorm on how each of the Amish values that Kraybill identifies might reshape our online behaviors.

Departing Hymn

"Full of Love and Christian Virtue" can be found on pp. 50-51 of *Virtual Lives*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.