

# Surviving Prosperity

By Ivan Bender

There he lay. His motionless body no longer resembled the healthy young man he had been. The mark on the forehead revealed where the dead ash tree had inflicted the blow that ended Jacob Miller's life. As we solemnly filed by his coffin to pay our last respects, reality hit home. Life really is fragile. Life truly is short.

As we visited with Jacob's loved ones throughout the evening, we could see a lot of support for his family. The women in the church brought meals. Fellow church brothers dropped their work and willingly pitched in with the farm chores, hauling manure and looking after the animals. Jacob's immediate and extended family could rest assured that all was taken care of.

A discussion was held on how his calf business would survive; after all, Jacob's oldest son was only six years old. Plans soon developed for one of the nephews to stay with the family for a while to run the calf operation. Perhaps changes would have to be made eventually, but the church structure was in place to help implement and facilitate those changes. It would all work out.

Yes, there would be huge adjustments and times of sorrow; only those who have walked the path of young widowhood could truly understand. But it was evident that Jacob's church consisted of a vital brotherhood. It was a church structured on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

This church did not express its love in flowery words and embraces, but rather in *doing*. Oh, to be sure, this church setting wasn't perfect; it was no heaven on earth. But it would be fair to say that Jacob Miller's home church was surviving prosperity.

## The Foundation

The true strength and overall soundness of Jacob's church amidst an increasingly godless and self-serving society justifies more scrutiny. Just what is the foundation of this church, revealed through the above united expression of love? Let's dig around a little and see if we can't uncover some foundational principles.

"A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." John 13:34-35

Let's face it—we all have different tastes and preferences. We all have various ways of viewing issues and solving problems. Working together like Jacob's church may be quite easy during unexpected calamities

like a death. But unless a church is able to work through its differences during the more monotonous seasons of life, it will eventually lose the “togetherness” that we hope to pass on to the next generation. It is only when individual church members make it a priority to lay down their will for the will of the whole that the church can perform as the true church of God.

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” 2 Corinthians 6:17-18

God seeks a separate people, a people separate from the evil world as a disciplined brotherhood. It is a solemn call to suffer for Christ as He submitted to God on Calvary. As a flock of sheep standing in a protective circle with their heads pointed inward, a united, disciplined church is a haven from the world of evil for the sincere Christian. When taken into this context, the church guidelines become a privilege and not a burden. It is an opportunity to witness to the world that we are willing to bear a few material inconveniences to belong to a united church that fulfills the commandment to be a separate people.

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” Matthew 10:37-39

Self-denial is a very important part of any sincere Christian’s life. In denying self, one is following Christ’s example. If self-denial is not one of the foundational principles of a church, it cannot survive like Jacob’s church did. True love cannot be practiced without self-denial.

The above is not an all-inclusive list of critical foundation stones a church needs to be built on, but it is intended to create somewhat of a framework. If we hope to understand what it will take for a church to survive prosperity, we need to first understand the foundation it is built on. In other words, we will need to understand our

core and original identity. We will touch more on this later.

As we study the above few, but incomplete list of foundational church values, I think we could all agree that establishing and maintaining a church’s foundation goes fully against human nature. Just like constant water running over a rock will eventually erode the rock, human nature, if not denied and crucified through the power of Christ, will erode and eventually destroy the church’s foundation. And just like it will take much time for water to erode stone, it can take a few generations for the fruits of human nature to do their damage to the church.

## Culture and Prosperity

Now that we have looked at the foundation for surviving prosperity, let’s look at the structure. Times of plenty, times of leisure, and times of extra money aren’t usually seen as a threat, but rather as a blessing. In some ways these things are a blessing, but dangers come with prosperity. Of course, one can survive prosperity physically, but can we survive it spiritually and culturally?

What do we mean by “culturally”? The definition of culture is “the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc., of a given people in a given period.”<sup>1</sup> We cannot escape culture. Every person alive today is part of a culture. We live in an American culture, and within that culture is our church culture. The type of culture we are a part of influences our personal habits, and therefore has an influence on our spiritual health.

We Anabaptist people are extremely blessed to be part of a church culture that upholds Christian values such as Scriptural church structure, humility, love for others, absence of divorce and remarriage, and church-imposed regulations to keep out what is considered detrimental to our spiritual welfare. The Anabaptist culture in itself does not provide a one-way ticket to salvation, but it serves as a vehicle to bring us to salvation through the teaching we receive by it. It brings structure to the Christian’s life as long as the culture conforms to God and not vice versa. In contrast, the prevalent American culture of today is riddled with an entitlement mentality (*give me, give me*), extreme individualism, instant gratification, justification of grossly immoral practices, and patriotism.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, S. “Changing the Culture of Care.” Mich Health Hosp. 2003 Jan-Feb;39(1):38

## Defining Prosperity

Exactly what is prosperity, and why do many of us who are concerned about our heritage refer to it in a negative way? Is prosperity bad?

The dictionary defines prosperity as “a prosperous condition; good fortune; wealth and success.” But what does that look like in a practical sense? Do you have to be the owner of a thriving business to be prosperous? I don’t think so. I believe we could say that prosperity is when we have our needs met, and even have more than what we need.

We can think of different times of prosperity in the Bible. In the time of Noah, they were “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” (Matthew 24:38). One has to wonder how different it would have been if they had not necessarily discontinued what they were doing but simply kept it in moderation, given God the glory, and worshipped Him in thankfulness.

Repeatedly, prosperity was experienced and then taken away as sin took over. Again and again the Israelites rose and fell as a nation until they eventually were scattered among many nations.

That we see prosperity as a bad thing stands to reason. In the Old Testament, God would bless His people when they turned to Him and served Him, but so often they then turned to idolatry, and God would take those blessings away from them. For example, God told the Israelites in Exodus 19:4–6, “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” But so many times, when God’s people enjoyed this prosperity, they would inevitably turn away from God. God therefore warned His people about this before they entered the promised land of Canaan—the land that was “flowing with milk and honey.” The warning is found in Deuteronomy 8:6-14:

“Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him. For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines,

and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”

Later on, in verses 19 and 20 of that same chapter, He warns them, “And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God.”

The Biblical example in Exodus 19:4-6 is prosperity almost at its fullest. The Israelites were promised to lack nothing. But God knew they would easily be distracted by these things, and He knows we can quickly be distracted as well. Yet, at times He allows us to be blessed with prosperity. In the New Testament, however, we do not see material blessings as an indication that we are blessed by God.

So is prosperity bad? The choice is ours. We should not feel guilty if God allows us to live in prosperity, but we need to be aware of the dangers that go along with that blessing. If we enter the battle alone, prosperity will be bad. But if we enlist the Lord’s help and allow others to speak into our lives, we can flourish.

## Surviving Prosperity

What do we mean when we talk about surviving prosperity? Again, turning to the dictionary for help, the definition of surviving is to “continue to live or exist,

especially in spite of danger or hardship." But what are we concerned about that needs to "continue to live or exist"?

When we refer to "surviving prosperity," we are talking about maintaining a church structure that shows forth the kind of cooperation and love that Jacob's church expressed, not simply at a time of death, but throughout all of life. This is a church that is a haven for the sorrowful and an example of soberness for the frivolous. A church with open arms for the repentant sinner and means of accountability for the unrepentant. A church that is intentional in striving to be the "body of Christ" and not simply a place of worship.

In such a church all effort is made not only to live this vision today, but also to be proactive in preserving the culture for the next generations that has enabled the conservative Anabaptist church to put action to Biblical teachings. The wellbeing of the next generations must be part of the church's vision today. This is what could be called "cultural stewardship." This type of stewardship is even more important than financial stewardship.

Good cultural stewardship can eventually fix shoddy financial stewardship, but good financial stewardship without cultural stewardship is like trying to float a boat with duct-taped holes. Eventually the outside pressures of the world will get in, and the church will disintegrate. And keep in mind, this can happen while all the cultural practices are still in place! Cultural practices are very important, but unless they are upholding Biblical principles, they are merely a hollow shell. The foundation of the church needs to be Biblical principles first, then brought to life by cultural practices.

As we know, our people as a culture and church survived intense persecution four to five hundred years ago. During this time, many individuals did not survive—they lost their lives because of their faith. But the church survived. A remnant of God's people has always survived persecution throughout history. The big question is, can we as a culture and church survive prosperity? Or will

prosperity cause us to blend into the world?

Our ancestors survived persecution by the grace of God, of course, but what practical weapons did they use that we can use today?

**Recognize the enemy.** In the *Martyrs Mirror* we read of brutal killings and physical abuses, but we also read

of smooth-talking people who tried to sway the Anabaptists' convictions at times of great mental and physical weakness. Some did give in, but many remained strong.

For the most part, the early Anabaptist church was able to recognize Satan for who he is—a roaring lion one day and a wolf in sheep's clothing the next.

To combat his wily ways,

they established church structure. And when a church establishes structure, over time that structure becomes tradition. Tradition based on a Biblical foundation is valuable for survival.

Do we recognize Satan for who he is during these times? Do we even try to recognize him, or are we lulled to sleep in the comfortable arms of prosperity? One way to recognize him is observing how the world is deceived. Part of the modern age mindset is doing away with anything that clings to the past (think of all the monuments torn down in the past five years). Another part is disconnecting from anything that demands devotion and self-sacrifice—everything from marriage to, yes, even church structure. We will be covering more specifics on this subject in future articles.

We also need to recognize the two extremes. Satan doesn't care which side of the road he pulls us in, as long as he gets us in the ditch. So far we could say we have been addressing the left side of the road. But the right side is just as real. It is possible to be so focused on establishing practices in our church life to uphold principles of separation that the practices become the center of attention instead of the principles themselves.

May all of us focus on the heavenly goal and not on one ditch or the other. This does not mean that we should

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not keep an eye on the ditches. But if we focus simply on running from the one, we will be sure to land in the other.

**Recognize your identity.** The early Anabaptists also recognized their identity. The dictionary describes identity as the “condition of being the same as something or someone assumed, described, or acclaimed.” The United States’ identity is the land of the free. We identify China as the land of no religious freedom and strict government control. However, even a country’s identity can change or stray from the original identity its founders meant for it to have. For example, many people feel America is not adhering to the founding fathers’ vision for the United States of America. The same can happen to cultural identities, like the Amish and Mennonites, or any other culture. Are the Anabaptist churches today clinging to the original Anabaptist identity?

So what is the Anabaptist people’s true identity? Is it straw hats and beards? Is it women’s coverings and modest dresses? Is it neat homesteads and successful businesses? Do we recognize the true identity of Anabaptism?

Jesus told the Pharisees, “If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). Obviously, the Pharisees had lost the true identity of being Abraham’s children. Are we living the vision and focus of the ones who prayerfully founded the Anabaptist movement? Or would Jesus say, “If you would be the [Anabaptist] children, you would be doing the [Anabaptist] works”? More importantly, are we living the vision and focus of Jesus Christ? Do we have a living hope to be called the children of God through the abundance of His grace?

It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate more on the Anabaptist identity. However, I do feel it justifies a little discussion.

Earlier we touched on Biblical principles. Here we will talk a little more about the cultural practices that uphold our foundational principles and values. Following are a few practices we uphold in order to live out these principles.

**Nonconformity in dress.** Nonconformity means the refusal to be same as the prevailing or mainstream society. For some Anabaptist churches, nonconformity in dress means wearing head coverings, dressing plain, and

wearing broad-brimmed hats while mainstream society sports styled hair, short pants, and baseball caps.

Nonconformity is also often practiced in other areas of the Anabaptist world and upholds the Biblical principles of being a separate people.

**Recognition of group/church authority—not only individual conscious.** Perhaps this is the single biggest difference between Anabaptists and mainstream Christianity. And no doubt it is one of the more critical practices. Insisting on unanimous agreement on issues before communion and not introducing new materialistic things and church practices without a unanimous church consensus (in German this would be viewed as a *rot der Gemeinde*) would belong in this section. This practice upholds the principle of self-denial and a disciplined church.

“The insistence on all church issues being unanimously agreed upon prior to communion and equality of all members of a church (without regard to income level or social status) is the very key to keeping prosperity and our identity in proper perspective,” commented one Amish man.

**Recognition of two distinct kingdoms.** At the birth of the Anabaptist church in 1525, the founders had finally come to the conclusion that the only way to have “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:27) was for it to be totally separate from the worldly government. Jesus’ words, “My kingdom is not of this world” indicates that His followers have the privilege through His grace to be citizens of His heavenly kingdom,

but in turn to be merely pilgrims and strangers in the world’s kingdom. The above principle results in the practice of the Anabaptist people not participating in public government elections, refraining from expressing

patriotism, and not accepting government handouts. This practice has not been as faithfully upheld by members of some of our communities in the past decade.

**A turning inward.** The early Anabaptists turned inward to their church family for help and encouragement during times of persecutions and hardships, not outward. Today we are not being persecuted physically and we are not fleeing for our lives, but we are being tested in a much

## Are we living the vision and focus of the ones who prayerfully founded the Anabaptist movement?

different way. As we find ourselves virtually dripping in money, how do we respond? Do we use prosperity to try to find comfort and satisfaction in temporal things? Another vacation to Florida, the next fishing trip, or the next horse auction?

One concerned Mennonite man made the following statement: "During these prosperous and potential times of spiritual hardships it seems we are moving outward to the world instead of inward to the church." While it's hard to even compare prosperity and physical persecution as hardships, perhaps he is on to something. Perhaps we are reacting in a not-so-good way to prosperity, instead of responding in a wholesome, upbuilding way.

## Summary

*"It seems that many Amish are Amish in name only. They are okay being Amish as long as it is convenient to be so. They don't have any convictions. Many are not content with having 'enough.' They see where they could make a little more money here and a little more money there."*—an elder of the Amish Church

*"I am convinced prosperity is the greatest threat to our churches. We do not have to kneel in front of wood or stone to have idols. These horses are our idols."*—an Amish bishop commenting on overindulgence in horses

The above comments should be sobering to all of us, which is the purpose of this article. And some of you may be wondering why we have to talk so much about church related things when we're talking about prosperity. It

is because the church is our "ark" for today. Just like the people in Noah's time could not survive unless they were in the safe confines of the ark, so we are not going to survive unless we are in the safe confines of the church.

If we again take a look at the definition of prosperity, we do not find any mention of money or finances. Our minds subconsciously get diverted in that direction because that definition is translated into the realm of money by the world. But it is just as possible to have a "wealth" of faith, or "success" in reaching salvation. And here is where we can reconcile the Old Testament translation of prosperity to the New Testament's translation. Just as today's heroes do not kill bullies like Goliath, today's successful people are not necessarily financially wealthy like a blessed Israelite. Just like David's zeal in killing Goliath is as an example of how the sincere Christian fearlessly fights today's spiritual battles, the prosperous condition promised the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8:6-10 is an example of how God will bless His faithful followers spiritually with peace, harmony, joy, and other fruits of the spirit. Without doubt, though, the greatest blessing will be to have God Himself wash the tears from our eyes and to walk the streets of gold. At that point, we will then experience prosperity at its very fullest.

To experience this eternal prosperity, however, we will need to survive prosperity here on earth. In my weakness, we shall attempt to elaborate more on this in the next three articles: "Surviving Prosperity as a Family," "Surviving Prosperity as a Business," and "Surviving Prosperity as a Church."