

“Every Baptist a Missionary” Johann G. Oncken and Disciple-making in Europe

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Disciples of Jesus Christ are acutely conscious of their inability to replicate themselves. It is not a natural process. A miracle is necessary every time another person embraces Christ in repentant faith and sets out on the path of following Christ. Nevertheless, disciples can be supremely confident that sowing seed will result in a harvest because God is calling out a people for His name, and the Great Commission is His chosen method of producing disciples.

The history of the Baptist denomination contains many examples of successful disciple-making disciples. Because the story of the Baptist denomination is usually told from the vantage point of English-speaking Baptists, one of the greatest of these Baptists may be overlooked. Every Baptist should know the story of the Father of European Baptists, Johann Gerhard Oncken. He dedicated his life to making disciples, and the effects of his ministry are still being felt around the world today.

Birth to New Birth

Oncken was born into a Lutheran home in Varel, in the Duchy of Oldenburg, on the North Sea, on January 26, 1800.¹ His father was away from home, working with conspirators who were seeking to overthrow Napoleon. When the plot was discovered, the older Oncken fled to England. He died there, never seeing his son or knowing he had one.

Oncken was reared by his grandmother, a severe woman who made sure he was a good Lutheran. The Lutheran church in that part of Germany was quite dead, and Oncken experienced no spiritual influences in early life. Oncken later stated “that neither from any of his teachers or from the Lutheran pastor, did he receive a single true direction of salvation by Jesus Christ.”²

¹ Most of the biographical details come from the only English-language biography of Oncken: John Hunt Cooke, *Johann Gerhard Oncken: His Life and Work* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1908).

² Cooke, 16.

In 1814 a Scottish businessman came to Varel, liked Oncken, and invited him to return to Scotland with him. Oncken jumped at the chance. The businessman's wife was Presbyterian, and the family gave Oncken his first Bible. He traveled extensively while in the man's employ, visiting England, France, and Germany, in addition to Scotland.

While in England for an extended period on business, Oncken stayed with a godly family that attended a Congregational church. The father openly prayed for Oncken's salvation during daily family devotions. After months of exposure to the gospel, Oncken visited Great Queen Street Methodist chapel in London, heard the gospel, and was saved. The key verse in his salvation was Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

He immediately became passionate about sharing his faith with friends and coworkers, sacrificing a portion of his lunch money to purchase tracts. He got a cold response from most of them, but within a short time after his salvation, he had the joy of seeing one of his neighbors in the apartment building profess faith in Christ. He knew he wanted to spend his life sharing the gospel.

Missionary

Oncken's passion to share the gospel—distributing tracts, writing letters to his mother and other relatives, and sharing the gospel regularly—came to the attention of the Congregationalist organizers of the Continental Society, an organization founded in 1819 to send missionaries to Continental Europe. In 1823 the Society appointed Oncken as a missionary to Germany and sent him to Hamburg.

Oncken joined an English Reformed Church in Hamburg (transferring his membership from the Independent church he had joined in London) and began attempting to evangelize his neighbors. His pastor, T. W. Matthews, invited him to live in his home and supported his work among the Germans. Matthews also provided a large room in which Oncken could hold preaching services, which he began to do in 1824. Cooke reports the remarkable growth that ensued:

At his first meeting on January 7th 1827 [sic, the date should be 1824] ten persons came out of curiosity to hear the new English religion, as his message was contemptuously called, and one soul was converted to God. The name of that first convert was C. F. Lange, who afterwards became a valuable helper in his work. At the next meeting

18, at the following 30, and on February 8th 180 attended; on February 24th the crowd was so great that about 100 were turned away for want of room; many came smiling and left weeping.³

Soon the established Union Church (the Lutherans and Reformed had merged in Germany and were the state-sponsored church) began harassing him. Fined, Oncken refused to pay and had his possessions seized. The meeting room provided by Matthews had to be discontinued, but Oncken held private meetings in cellars, alleyways, private homes, and wherever he could get a hearing. The persecution and his incessant activities caused people to flock to hear him, and the mission prospered.

Hamburg was a very religious city, but Oncken discovered widespread biblical illiteracy. Only one Lutheran pastor in the entire city believed in the deity of Christ. Oncken believed that revival would follow if he could get the Scriptures into the hands of his German countrymen. In 1828 he opened a bookstore, primarily for the distribution of Bibles. Through his contacts in Scotland, he connected with the Edinburgh Bible Society, becoming its agent in 1828. For the next fifty years (until 1878), he and his coworkers distributed Bibles provided by that society. According to its records, he distributed two million Bibles. A byproduct of starting this business was that Oncken was able to gain citizenship in Hamburg on April 25, 1828.

While this sketch will not focus on Oncken's family life, it is worth noting that he was a family man and experienced the blessings and trials of domestic life. In 1828 he married Sarah Mann of London. She became fluent in German and was a great asset to his ministry. Between 1829 and 1844, Sarah bore him four daughters and three sons. They had their share of heartache, with a daughter dying of cholera at a few months of age, a daughter dying of an illness at age 5, and their youngest son dying in a fire at the age of 8 while Oncken was away preaching. Oncken was left with five children, one of whom was 15 months old when Sarah passed away in 1845. Two years later, he married another British lady named Ann Dogshun, and they were married until her death in 1873. She was loved both by Oncken's children and the Hamburg congregation. Finally, in 1875 Oncken married Jane Clark, a member of Spurgeon's Tabernacle; she outlived him, caring for him during his final days in Zurich.

³ Cooke, 26.

Becoming a Baptist

In 1826 two evangelical Lutheran ministers had offered to pay for Oncken's ministerial education if he would commit to the Lutheran ministry. He declined on the basis that he already had misgivings about infant baptism. When his first daughter was born in 1829, he declined to present her for sprinkling.

Pastor Matthews urged Oncken to present his child for baptism and preached a sermon on infant baptism to convince him. The weakness of Matthews' argument cemented Oncken's resolution to pursue believer's baptism. Matthews evidently made a poor case for infant baptism, as two Methodists who were present in the assembly subsequently became Baptists, and Matthews himself—now studying the question in earnest—went to England a few months later and received baptism from Baptists there. He later became pastor of a Baptist church in Boston. Oncken, meanwhile, continued to study the Scriptures.

In 1829 an American sea captain named Tubbs while visiting Hamburg had his ship detained for six months because of ice. He was a member of Sansom Street Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Having met Oncken and the little group of disciples gathered around him, he began holding Bible studies with them and explaining Baptist doctrine to them. Testing everything by the Scriptures, Oncken became convinced of believer's baptism.

But there was no one in Germany to baptize him. He wrote to Robert Haldane in Scotland for advice; Haldane suggested he baptize himself, citing the example of John Smyth. Oncken saw no biblical precedent for this and rejected the advice. He then wrote to Joseph Ivimey, a notable Baptist pastor in London. Ivimey invited him to come to London to be baptized. That was not practical (and would be no testimony to the German believers), so Oncken continued to pray about the matter and await the Lord's will. He talked with British and American visitors to Hamburg. But he was unsure how to proceed.

Captain Tubbs returned to America and told his pastor and other leaders of the Triennial Convention about Oncken and his situation. Founded in 1814, the Triennial Convention was the national missionary-sending agency of the American Baptists. One of those leaders was Barnas Sears, a professor at Hamilton Literary Theological Institute in New York. In 1833 Sears went to Europe for academic studies primarily at Halle. While in

Germany, Sears went to Hamburg to find Oncken.⁴ Oncken had been praying and waiting for over four years.

Because of Oncken's busy preaching schedule, there was some delay in Sears being able to connect with the German, but finally they were able to do so. Sears was delighted to find a small group of believers who had become thoroughly convinced of believer's baptism. They desired baptism, but Hamburg had a law against immersion. The American professor and the small band of Germans were not deterred, but they were cautious. On April 22, 1834, Sears, Oncken, Oncken's wife, and five others rowed to an island in the middle of the Elbe River and were baptized at midnight. Oncken later wrote,

All was dark; we had neither the prospect nor the hope of success. We were compelled blindly to follow our Master. Not one of us entertained the slightest hope that the Almighty would, by this feeble commencement, convey his thoughts of peace to thousands, and spread afar his ancient apostolic truth. Conviction impelled us onwards; we could not but act as we did, come what might. But, although externally all was dark, within us all was light. In those memorable days which followed, my heart was so joyous, it seemed to me, as I walked through the streets of Hamburg, as if everybody must know I had put on Christ by baptism.⁵

The next day, Sears ordained Oncken, although the German had no formal education. The American professor then presided over the establishment of the first Baptist church in Germany and "the oldest surviving Baptist church in Europe."⁶ Shortly thereafter, Sears petitioned the American Triennial Convention to give financial support to Oncken's work in Hamburg. "If we consider the pagan state of that great city," reasoned Sears, "we must look upon this missionary labor of private brethren as truly apostolical." Sears conceded that "great results had not yet been witnessed, but everything wears an encouraging aspect." The professor especially commended the atmosphere of Christian love that characterized the embryonic church at Hamburg.⁷

⁴ Sears went on to become successively president of Newton Theological Seminary and Brown University.

⁵ Cooke, 49.

⁶ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: The Broadman Press, 1987), 471.

⁷ Cooke, 230-231.

Hamburg

The new church met in Oncken's home at No. 7 Englische Planke in Hamburg, using the bottom floor as a Bible bookstore. The bookstore grew rapidly and was soon moved to larger facilities near the center of the city.

The Continental Society severed connections with Oncken upon receiving word of his baptism. Through the instrumentality of Sears, Oncken was accepted as a missionary of the Triennial Convention in America (later, the ABMU). In addition to seeking to win people to Christ—his primary heartbeat, Oncken also believed strongly that Baptist teachings best reflected the New Testament. If he met a fellow believer, he usually sought to convince the person of Baptist convictions. And he could be very persuasive.

Julius Köbner, having been saved in 1826, met Oncken shortly after Oncken was baptized. Oncken convinced him of Baptist theology and baptized him in 1836. A Danish Jew, Köbner had a burden for Denmark and accompanied Oncken on numerous missionary forays into Denmark and saw Baptist witness established in Scandinavia.

Gottfried Wilhelm Lehmann grew up in Berlin and was influenced by Mennonites. His interest in tract distribution brought him into contact with Oncken, and they were friends before either was a Baptist. Oncken convinced him of Baptist views and baptized him, his wife, and four others outside Berlin in 1836. Lehmann became pastor of this small assembly. In 1840 Oncken suggested he seek ordination from the British Baptists. Lehmann received this ordination in London on June 29, 1840. His church in Berlin grew to 100 members in 1841 and was forced to move out of his house into new facilities. By 1842 the Berlin congregation surpassed 300 members.

Oncken, Köbner, and Lehmann made an amazing triumvirate. The German Christians nicknamed them the *Kleeblatt*, or cloverleaf. From the hubs in Hamburg and Berlin, these men and their associates fanned out, distributing vast amounts of literature, seeing professions of faith, and gathering them into Baptist churches. To organize the literature distribution, Oncken founded the Hamburg Tract Society in 1836, which eventually worked in conjunction with “the Religious Tract Society of London, the American Bible and Tract Society, the Scottish National Bible Society, and other Christian literary institutions.”⁸

Oncken's work in Hamburg and across Germany faced severe persecution from the local political units and from the established state-

⁸ Cooke, 90.

church. Conventicle laws in many German states required an authorized representative of the Established Church in any assembly of five or more persons not consisting of family members. Oncken applied for permission to hold *devotio domestica* (family devotions) for his house-church in Hamburg, but his request was denied for obvious reasons. The chief Lutheran pastor in Hamburg, A. J. Rambach, was a severe opponent of the Baptists, whom he called “a fanatical Anabaptist sect.”⁹ He urged the Hamburg government to apply conventicle laws directly against the Baptists.

Hamburg authorities arrested Oncken and placed him in the notorious Winsersbaum prison in both 1839 and 1840. Sarah pled with the authorities to release Oncken when Lydia, his daughter, fell seriously ill. Oncken was offered release if he would promise not to preach. He declined. Finally, in 1840 he was released as Lydia grew close to death. Rather than staying home, he went to Copenhagen and presided over the baptism of seven people. Lydia died while he was away. The oft-heard charges that these early German Baptists were fanatical had some truth to it.

Oncken’s co-pastor, Köbner, and his deacon, Lange, were also arrested. Once, Oncken heard singing from a cell above his, and, recognizing the voice as that of his co-pastor, he chimed in and the two of them sang in the jail like Paul and Silas.

The tide finally turned in 1842. A great fire devastated Hamburg in 1842. Over three days, 2000 homes were destroyed, 30,000 people were rendered homeless, 100 were injured, and about 50 died.¹⁰ Oncken and his assistants, especially Lange, stepped up and heroically served the suffering people. The Baptists had just secured a four-story warehouse for their use. Oncken immediately invited the authorities to use three of the stories as emergency housing for people dispossessed by the fire. They showed love and compassion to the very people who had harassed and persecuted them for the previous decade. Both the populace and the government rapidly changed their opinion of the Baptists.

Nevertheless, in 1843 Oncken went to prison yet again for administering the sacraments without proper ordination. Hamburg was beginning to shift its policies away from persecution, however, and he was released after just four days.¹¹ Later that year vandals harmed the Baptists’

⁹ Wayne A. Detzler, “Johann Gerhard Oncken’s Long Road to Toleration,” *JETS* 36/2 (June 1993): 231.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

property, and Oncken's old enemy Police Chief Binder aggressively defended the Baptists. Oncken wrote,

O, what a change! The senator at the head of the police has shown me in this affair the utmost kindness. For nearly 23 years I had this person for my bitterest foe, who hunted me during that period like a partridge on the mountains, but now he is my friend and my protector.¹²

In the face of such opposition, the Hamburg church grew to 380 by 1845, and in 1847 the first building was erected. In 1867 the church had grown to the point that a new spacious church was constructed, with seating for over 1400. Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached at the opening of that building and tells this remarkable story:

I remember in the life of my dear friend, Mr. Oncken, of Hamburg, when he began to baptize people in the Alster contrary to the law. He was brought up before the burgomaster, and that worthy magistrate put him several times in prison. At last Mr. Burgomaster said, "I tell you what it is, Mr. Oncken; the law must be obeyed. Do you see that little finger of mine? As long as that little finger will move, I will put you down in your illegal baptisms." "Well," said my brave old friend, "Mr. Burgomaster, with all respect to you, I do see that little finger of yours; but do you see that great hand of God? I am afraid that you do not see it as I do. But, as long as that great hand of God is with me, you cannot put me down." I opened Mr. Oncken's chapel in Hamburg some years afterwards, and I had a most respectable audience gathered together to hear me preach the gospel, and in the center of that audience sat the Burgomaster. He was far more rejoiced to be there than to be carrying out an oppressive law. His little finger had ceased its movements against the Baptist, and there he sat to show what the power of God's right arm could do; for he was listening to the Word of God from a Baptist preacher, in a meeting-house built by the man whom he had been called upon to put down.¹³

¹² Detzler, 240.

¹³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Zedekiah; or, the Man Who Could Not Say 'No,'" (Sermon #2178, volume 36) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1890). Sermon preached March 30, 1890. Quote taken from Baptist History class notes of Dr. Fred Moritz.

In 1848 in the context of revolutions sweeping Europe, the citizens of Hamburg gathered and voted to grant every citizen full religious freedom. Oncken was among the voters, and Baptists benefited greatly from this extension of religious freedom to all. By that time, there were 1,500 Baptists in Germany and 26 congregations.¹⁴ Hamburg extended full toleration to the Baptists in 1857, and in 1866 complete toleration of all religious bodies was finally declared.

By 1850 Oncken's church was sending out three missionaries and had raised funds to sponsor the planting of 20 churches in Germany. The key to this rapid expansion was a discipleship mindset. In 1849 thirty German Baptist churches (56 representatives), all of which traced their birth to Oncken and his associates' work, formed together the Union of Associated Churches of Baptized Christians in Germany and Denmark. Their charter emphasized discipleship.¹⁵

- The charter urged each church to have a missions committee, to take up regular offerings for missions work, and to participate in periodic missions conferences.
- The committees generally met monthly to discuss missions strategies.
- The Union divided into four regional associations, and each developed its own mission-support mechanisms.
- The charter recommended the establishment of youth groups in each church. The youth were taught how to evangelize and were mobilized to share the gospel.
- Laymen were encouraged to evangelize as they carried out their daily tasks, and funds were set up to supplement the income of laymen who suffered financially because they devoted time to evangelism.

In short, Oncken's motto, "Every Baptist a Missionary," permeated the Union.

European Ministry

Oncken himself was the most successful missionary sent out of Hamburg. In addition to leading his church, Oncken began traveling across

¹⁴ Detzler, 240.

¹⁵ Allan Effa, "Diaspora Strategist: The Missionary Work of Johann Oncken," July 2007. "Featured Article" at www.globalmissiology.org: 9-10.

Europe, preaching the gospel and Baptist convictions. He preached in Denmark, England, Lithuania, Switzerland, and many other places.

His biographer randomly selected one of Oncken's missionary letters to the ABMU from 1846. Here is a summary of Oncken's itinerary:

- Oncken traveled to Breslau in Silesia, won two Roman Catholics to Christ, who quickly brought four others to salvation. Oncken then baptized these six people and organized them into a Baptist church. He ordained a pastor to minister to them and spent several weeks giving them instruction.
- He moved on to Stettin in Prussia, where he discovered that 120 persons had been baptized in the last few months. He ministered among them, gave them money and ordered Bibles for them from the Depot. He also learned of revival in five or six surrounding villages, in which 49 people had been baptized earlier that year.
- He visited a Moravian settlement at Niesky, was welcomed graciously by the minister, who brought up baptism. They enjoyed spirited conversation, with the minister admitting that infant baptism had no support in Scripture.
- From there he traveled to Thorn, where he had religious conversation with a small group of members of the State Church. Although not winning them to Baptist views, he believed "his testimony had not been in vain." His biographer concludes, "If very definite in faith, Mr. Oncken was broad in charity."¹⁶
- "He then went on to Schneidenmuhl, where he was disheartened by a cold formal reception, for nothing seemed to repel him like religious frost."¹⁷
- Coming to Schwetz, he met a procession of Poles, singing songs to the Virgin Mary. He gave them tracts.
- On the Lord's Day, he preached at a Mennonite Church. Then in the evening, he preached again in a barn to about 100 people.
- Over the next few weeks, he visited and preached at Graudenz, Garnsee, Saalfeldt, Allenstein, Warteburg, "and other adjacent places, and making some evangelical efforts at each."¹⁸
- Arriving in Konigsberg, he was arrested and ordered to return to Hamburg. He left but went on to Elbing, where he was again

¹⁶ Cooke, 95.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

- arrested and ordered to return home. Before leaving, he gathered the believers there and preached and exhorted until late at night.
- He left the next morning at 4:00 and took a 48-hour train ride to Berlin, during which he witnessed to several people on the train. Arriving in Berlin, he spent four or five days with the Baptist believers in that city.
 - He then returned to Stettin, helped to organize a church there, evaded the police who were searching for him, and finally arrived safely back in Hamburg.
 - The biographer indicates that this was a typical missionary tour. The following month he traveled to England to raise money to build a new chapel in Hamburg and was able to collect 450 pounds. He reported that 73 people had been added to the Hamburg church that year by baptism, raising the membership to 326.

As in Hamburg, Oncken and his associates faced almost continuous persecution for the first few decades of their work in Germany. At this time, Germany consisted of thirty-six independent states, and many of them were as repressive as Hamburg. The disunity of Germany did mean that Oncken and his associates could evade persecution by fleeing from one state into another. Cooke reports,

During his many missionary journeys, his safety and even his life were often endangered by the fury of fanatical mobs, and until 1848 he was also subjected to expulsions, fines, and imprisonment by the police. In the duchy of Hesse-Gassel, even a reward was offered for his apprehension. In Denmark, he was declared an outlaw, and a judicial decree was issued threatening with the severest penalties any person concealing his whereabouts while in the country, and offering a reward of twenty dollars to any person causing his arrest or giving precise information as to where he could be found. Mr. Oncken later wrote about this: ‘Our baptisms all took place under cover of the night and on my missionary tours, which were frequently extensive, I was banished successively from almost every State in Germany. I could never travel as an honest man by daylight, but was compelled to journey on foot in the darkness, to hold services, examine candidates, administer the ordinances, and form churches in the dead of night, and

take care to be across the frontiers before break of day for fear of my pursuers.”¹⁹

Given the spectacular results Oncken enjoyed, one might be inclined to question his theology of evangelism. On the contrary, Oncken was a careful theologian. Consider these excerpts from a letter written to the son of a British friend who had not yet come to Christ:

The reason why faith is represented in the Holy Scriptures as of such paramount importance, does not arise from any inherent efficacy in faith itself, but because true faith forgets and rejects everything on earth and in heaven, and looks to and grasps the Lord Jesus Christ and His work. . . . We do not wish you to go to heaven, my dear boy, without good works, for you never will enter those holy gates without them, but we wish you to bring such works as are perfect: The works of the Lord Jesus Christ who had no sin, neither was any guile found in his mouth. . . . Faith, then, dear Martin, upholds and defends the most perfect works that can be conceived: for it rests upon the glorious work of our dear Redeemer. If such be the case, it follows as a matter of course that in our own lives we shall tread as closely in the footsteps of our Lord, as present imperfection allows, but never, never can our imperfect obedience gain us an admission to heaven.”²⁰

Oncken was, in fact, decidedly Calvinistic, but he was warm-hearted toward any who preached the gospel. In a letter to Sarah while she was in Edinburgh before they were married, Oncken wrote,

I am sorry to say that though God has some witnesses of the faith in Hamburg, there is not one serious German I have met, with whom I can agree in doctrines, they are all Arminians without exception, and a holy Arminian I can love as well as a Calvinist [sic], but there are no English Methodists among the Germans.²¹

Under Oncken’s direction, the German Baptists sent missionaries to Denmark, Finland, Poland, Holland, Switzerland, Russia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Africa. Many European countries owe their Baptist origins to

¹⁹ Cooke, 102.

²⁰ Cooke, 127-128.

²¹ Ibid., 42-43.

Oncken and his colleagues. Each of these countries has its own story, some of which are vast and fascinating in themselves. Here we can only sketch some of them.

- Denmark, 1838. Oncken and Köbner established the first Baptist church in Köbner's home country. The Danish authorities launched vigorous persecution of the Baptists, urged to it by the established Lutheran Church. Nevertheless, by 1892 the largest body of dissenters in the country was Baptist.²²
- Netherlands, 1845. A Dutch Reformed minister, J. E. Feisser, was defrocked for questioning infant baptism in the early 1840s. Oncken sent Köbner to meet him, and Köbner won him to Baptist views. In May 1845 Köbner baptized Feisser and six others and formed them into a Baptist church in Gasselte-Nijveen.
- Hungary, 1846. Hungarian carpenters who were working in Hamburg after the great fire came into contact with Oncken and the Baptists and were converted. They returned to Hungary and established a Baptist church in Budapest. Within a few years, it was scattered by persecution. Nearly thirty years later, Oncken sent Heinrich Meyer to Hungary, and he succeeded in establishing another Baptist church in Budapest, baptizing eight converts on August 26, 1874. One of the persons baptized by Meyer was Kornya Mihaly. He began studying the Scriptures, and in 1877 Oncken ordained him to gospel ministry. He began a dynamic preaching ministry in which it is said that he baptized 11,000 Hungarians before his death in 1917.
- Switzerland, 1847. Oncken made a preaching tour of Switzerland, locating several house churches that already practiced believer's baptism. He helped several organize as Baptist churches, and he distributed literature. His assistant, Friederich Maier, planted a Baptist church in Zurich in 1849, which became the hub for Baptist missionary activity in the country. The Swiss churches joined the Baptist Union in Germany in 1870.
- Austria, 1847. Some Austrian workers who had helped in Hamburg after the great fire adopted Baptist views through Oncken's influence. They invited Oncken to preach in Vienna in 1847, where he saw a number of professions of faith. Returning

²² G. Winfred Hervey, *The Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands: From the time of Carey to the present date* (St. Louis: C. R. Barns Publishing Co., 1892), 799-803.

twice more in 1848, Oncken encouraged the Austrian believers to organize, but government oppression there was fierce. A British missionary came to Austria to aid the work and saw a number of conversions and baptisms, but his entire house church was arrested and imprisoned by Austrian authorities in 1850. It was nearly twenty years later before the first Austrian Baptist church could be organized, and freedom of religion did not come to Austria until early the next century. Oncken's son, W. S. Oncken, ministered in Austria for some time.²³

- Sweden, 1849. F. O. Nilsson, baptized by Oncken in 1847, began preaching in Sweden in 1849. Banished from Sweden in 1852, he organized a Swedish Baptist church in America. Before he left, he baptized Andreas Wiberg, who had been convinced by Oncken of Baptist views the previous year. Wiberg's extensive efforts brought success and persecution from the established Lutheran Church.²⁴
- Russia, 1864. In 1864 Oncken preached in St. Petersburg and led a number of Russian Mennonites to the Lord, and they established the first Russian Baptist church three years later. Shortly after he first arrived, Oncken met with the President of the Ministry for the Interior, Count Sievers. The Count informed Oncken that people in Russia were free to hold whatever faith they chose, but proselytizing was strictly forbidden, and Oncken's was evidently a proselytizing faith. To this, Oncken replied,

Your Excellence, everything depends on what you understand by proselytizing; if the charge brought against us means that our primary object is to put people under water, we repudiate the charge. We Baptists give to baptism a different place in theology from almost all other sects. We do not hold that it is necessary to get to heaven; we believe it has no connection with it, and if a person came to me wishing to be baptized in order to get to heaven, I would not comply with such a request. We hold that simple faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work saves the soul; and we believe that God has called us to preach this great truth among the millions throughout Europe, who have rejected all revealed truth and who form a most dangerous

²³ McBeth, 477-478.

²⁴ Hervey, 807-817.

element to all good governments. Our primary object is, therefore, to win souls to Christ.²⁵

The Count was not persuaded and told Oncken he must leave the country. Oncken wrote in his journal that he found four German Baptists living in St. Petersburg when he arrived. During his time there, eight Russians professed faith in Christ and requested baptism; Oncken got to know them and became convinced of the reality of the profession of seven of them. On the night before he left the city, he baptized the seven, the first people to be Scripturally baptized in St. Petersburg in modern times.

In 1869 Oncken again visited Russia, this time penetrating far into the interior (as far as Odessa), visiting hundreds of villages, and preaching the gospel hundreds of times. Many baptisms and several small churches resulted. The travels were extremely difficult and physically taxing (he was 69 years old), but the Lord preserved him. From Russia he visited Bulgaria and Romania, meeting brethren in each country and preaching the gospel. The believers in Russia—especially Southern Russia—experienced severe persecution, and many Baptists found themselves in Russian prisons. Oncken persuaded his Baptist friends in England to approach Dean Stanley of the Anglican Church about this persecution. When Czar Alexander II visited London in 1874, Stanley approached the Czar's entourage about the persecution, and the result was the almost complete ending of the persecutions until the Czar's death.

- Oncken also baptized and trained the church planters who founded the first Baptist churches in Romania and the upper Balkans.

In 1853 Oncken traveled to America. Shortly after his arrival, while traveling by train between New York and Boston, he was involved in a tragic accident, in which the train plummeted into a ravine. He was injured and experienced head pain for years afterward, but his life was remarkably spared. Over fifty fellow passengers died in the crash.

Despite the injuries sustained, he continued his ministry across America. In a letter to his home church, Oncken admitted that he felt great apprehension every time he got on a train thereafter, but he coveted their prayers for him as he reckoned he had about 10,000 miles of travel ahead of

²⁵ Cooke, 147.

him in the U.S. before he could return home. Preaching among German immigrants, he helped establish a strong German Baptist Church, which spread rapidly across America. Before returning to Germany, he had consecrated 48 German church planters to work among the immigrants in America. One of the men baptized with Oncken by Barnas Sears in 1834 was J. H. Krueger. Krueger preceded Oncken to America in 1852 and planted a German Baptist church in Peoria, Illinois. The grandparents of my friend and colleague, Dr. Fred Moritz, raised their family in that church.

What kind of man was J. G. Oncken? Despite his complete lack of formal theological training, like Spurgeon, Moody, Bob Jones, and many others, he was burdened that young German Christians have an opportunity for ministerial training. In 1848 he began training young men for ministry, developing courses of study that included grammar, theology, and church history. Gradually, demand grew, leading to the birth of Hamburg Baptist Seminary in 1880. The school continued to train pastors for several generations.

An episode in 1855 gives a taste of his personality. Oncken visited Spurgeon shortly after the young preacher became pastor of New Park Street Church in London. He asked James Spurgeon, Charles' brother, to arrange an interview. Spurgeon sent back word that he had no time for chats, saying, in typical Spurgeon fashion, that if the angel Gabriel asked for a chat, he'd say, "Gladly, after I go to heaven." Oncken returned a response that he "asked not for a chat but to lay before him the case of himself and his eighty fellow labourers, and he demanded an interview in their name and in the name of their common Master and for the promotion of His cause." Spurgeon met with Oncken, and New Park Street Church took on the Hamburg mission for 90 pounds a year. Spurgeon and Oncken had a warm friendship from then on.²⁶

Oncken, of course, wasn't perfect. Eventually, his strong leadership led to contention, and churches had to assert their autonomy. This controversy is known as the *Hamburg Streit*. Oncken argued that the Hamburg church was the "mother church," and other churches should affiliate with her as daughters. Köbner and Lehmann wisely argued for autonomous Baptist churches. As he aged, Oncken appears to have become somewhat autocratic. Fortunately, Oncken's successor in Hamburg was able to patch things up, avoiding a rupture in the Baptist Union.²⁷

²⁶ Cooke, 159.

²⁷ McBeth, 476.

At the age of 79, Oncken suffered a stroke from which he only slowly recovered. By this time, he had relinquished his headship over the book depot, the mission, and the church. Dr. Bickel, a German who had studied at Rochester Theological Seminary and served a pastorate in the US, succeeded him as head of the German Mission. Oncken's successor as pastor of the Hamburg Baptist Church was Mr. Kemnitz. In 1881 Oncken retired to Zurich. He suffered from ill health for several years but lived to age 83, dying on January 2, 1884.

Conclusion

Cooke reports the following results of Oncken's work:

At the time of his death the statistics of the Union of German Baptists showed more than 150 churches, with 31,438 members, and 17,000 children in Sunday Schools. This does not give the entire results, for there had been formed Baptist centres in Austria, Bulgaria, Roumania [sic], Hungary, Poland, Holland, Switzerland, Trans-Caucasia, and throughout Russia. German Baptist churches had also been planted in South Africa, in the United States, some outlying places on the American Continent, and one in the neighbourhood of Mount Ararat, all really the outcome of Mr. Oncken's work. Still later reports show that God is blessing the work by its continuance with greater success and more rapid advance than ever, so that at the time this book is written there are in connection with the German Baptist Union 280 churches with 1222 preaching stations, having a total membership of 54,000; 771 Sunday Schools with 31,500 scholars. Emenating [sic] from the small beginnings in Hamburg, the movement has spread into Denmark, Russia, and Poland, and in each of these countries there are now Baptist Unions with a total membership of about 60,000 grouped in 173 churches.²⁸

Statistics, however, are not the whole story. Oncken passionately believed in discipleship. One believer multiplying his influence by investing in others, who can then do the same. Historian Leon McBeth called Oncken a "one-man mission society, theological seminary, and literature distribution center. Seldom has one person contributed so much to the development of a

²⁸ Cooke, 60-61.

denomination, nor left his stamp more indelibly upon it.”²⁹ This is a just statement, but Oncken alone clearly could not have achieved such results. Oncken taught his converts that every Baptist is a missionary, and the work spread across Continental Europe like fire in the prairie. Oncken was truly the “The Father of Continental Baptists” by being a disciple-making disciple.

Let us give Oncken the last word, written to his son William from New York in 1854:

You must not be discouraged in your Christian course by the discovery of your sinful propensities - these will be gradually more fully revealed to you. God does not convert the sinner, to show to him how good he is, but how weak, helpless, sinful and depraved he is, that thus all self-dependence may be destroyed. But then the Spirit of Christ who teaches us this bitter lesson concerning ourselves, also shows us from the Holy Scriptures what a gracious, faithful and almighty Saviour we have, and that through the grace and strength of Him we can do all things. The two great truths which from the day of our conversion to the day we enter into heaven the Lord teaches those who shall be saved are in reference to ourselves that we are poor, lost, helpless sinners, who, if left to themselves, must perish for ever, and in reference to God, that out of boundless compassion He has sent His only begotten Son into the world to atone for the guilt of all who should believe in Him, and then in this glorious Saviour more – infinitely more—has been brought back to all who believe in Him, than ever was lost by Adam's transgression and our own sin. ... Oh, how would my heart rejoice if God should prepare you to enter in and continue the blessed work in Germany when I shall have been removed from the field of labour. There is, after all, nothing great on earth, my dear Willy, but to glorify God in our own salvation, and then to be honoured in saving others.³⁰

²⁹ McBeth, 470.

³⁰ Cooke, 139-141.

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