

“Every Baptist a Missionary”

Johann G. Oncken and Disciple-making in Europe

David Saxon
Professor of Bible and Church History
Maranatha Baptist University

Introduction

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.

I. Birth to New Birth

“He stated in after life that neither from any of his teachers or from the Lutheran pastor, did he receive a single true direction of salvation by Jesus Christ.”

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

II. Missionary

“From this headquarters, he distributed Bibles, circulated tracts, helped to establish Sunday schools, and continued his preaching ministry.”

III. Baptist

“I became fully convinced from the study of the Scriptures (for I was entirely unacquainted with the sentiments of the Baptists) of the truth of believers’ baptism and the nature of a Christian church.”

“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.”

IV. Hamburg

“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’” (Spurgeon).

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V. European Ministry

“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.”

VI. Conclusion

Oncken was a “one-man mission society, theological seminary, and literature distribution center. Seldom has one person contributed so much to the development of a denomination, nor left his stamp more indelibly upon it” (McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 470).

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