

DIASPORA STRATEGIST: THE MISSIONARY WORK OF JOHANN ONCKEN

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am drawn to the life and ministry of Johann Oncken because the movement he spawned is of personal significance to me. As a member of a North American Baptist Conference church I recognize that some of my denomination's heritage and vitality is partially traced to the influence of this man. It has also been my privilege to serve as a missionary in a region of West Africa that received some of its first Christian missionaries from nineteenth century Baptists in Germany. Furthermore, I trace my spiritual roots through my father's side of the family to the ministry of Oncken. My ancestors were among the first generation of German-speaking Baptists in Europe. My great grandmother frequently recalled a visit which Oncken had made in their humble home in rural Poland.

The study of Oncken's missionary career, however, is instructive to today's growing interest in diaspora missions. His outreach efforts to sailors, temporary workers and farmers who had settled outside of Germany indicate that he was a visionary man who understood the dynamics of migratory movements. His commitment to the

evangelization of scattered German people resulted in a broad network of churches in a relatively short time.

This paper will begin by looking at the religious climate of nineteenth century Germany and the conditions which favored receptivity toward Oncken's message. Next, we will briefly survey Oncken's life and formative influences. Following, we will refer to the early growth of the Baptist movement, with particular note to the means by which it spread. Finally, we will give special attention to Oncken's methodologies and their effect on the growth of the movement.

II. THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE OF NINETEENTH CENTURY GERMANY

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were no Baptist churches on the European continent, despite nearly 200 years of Baptist expansion in England and its American colonies. The forces of Puritanism and Separatism which had given birth to the Baptist church of England had not directly affected the people of Germany. Prior to 1800 the German people were evenly divided between Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches. The most significant phenomenon on the German religious scene was the Pietistic movement of the 17th century which arose as a reaction to the cold creedalism and lifelessness which had engulfed the Lutheran church at the time. This movement sought to bring renewal and revitalization within the established church, bringing spiritual awakening and new structures within Protestantism. Although Pietism had its birthplace in Germany its revolutionary effect had been much more felt in England and North America. The influence of Pietism may have been tempered a bit by another

growing movement in German Protestantism: the rise of scholasticism and its scientific approach to the study of Scriptures and the history of Christianity.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century these two somewhat contradictory forces of Pietism and Rationalism held sway in Germany, the former predominating among grass roots, working class people. This resurgence brought about a new emphasis on personal religion, Bible study, prayer and a relationship to God through conversion. Some among the movement were calling for a voluntary church as opposed to the State churches.

It was this Pietist resurgence that provided the major impetus for the development of the Baptist churches in Europe. Many Pietist groups, gathered for Bible study and prayer, arrived at the conviction of believers' baptism before they had even heard of Baptists (McBeth, 187:466). The time seemed uniquely ripe for the type of ministry exercised by Oncken.

III. A MISSIONARY IS RAISED UP

Johann Gerhard Oncken was born January 26, 1800 in the small German town of Varel in Oldenburg. Little is known of his early childhood years and family life. His father was sent into exile for political reasons when Johann was thirteen. Because of great financial hardships, Johann was sent to Scotland to live with the family of a Scottish merchant the Onckens knew well. For several years he worked as an apprentice in Edinburgh where he had his first contact with Evangelical Christianity, particularly the renewal movement led by the lay brothers Robert and James Haldane. These wealthy landowners and shipping magnates expended their finances and energy, taking the message of reform all over Scotland.

Oncken later moved to London where he attended an independent chapel in Greenwich. Both the public worship and the family prayers in the home where he lodged deeply affected him and warmed his heart toward God. It was, however, in Great Queen Street Methodist Church that he made the decision to give his life to Christ. The sermon that day was from Romans 8:1, "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." Oncken describes his experience thus: "The creation of my new life laid so rich a blessing for this testimony that I went home with an inexpressible blessing" (Wagner, 1977:5). Immediately Oncken was filled with zeal to share his evangelical faith with others.

For several years he continued his business as a merchant in London but his primary interest was clearly in the direction of kingdom work. Whatever he could save from his earnings was used to buy Bibles and tracts which were then given away. Eventually he expressed his desire to return to his homeland and in 1823 he was appointed by the Continental Society of London as their missionary to Germany. This British society focused on the distribution of Bibles and other Christian literature. Shortly after marrying Sarah Man they settled in Hamburg to begin their work.

Their ministry duties involved operating a small book store and distributing Bibles and tracts, as well as conducting evangelistic services. It was in this context that he preached his first full sermon and grew to become one of Germany's greatest and most persuasive preachers (Wagner, 1977:5).

Oncken held services in his apartment and made special efforts to reach the many sailors who visited that port city. It was difficult to assess the fruit of that ministry since they were in contact for only a brief period of time. The first ten years of ministry in

Hamburg produced meager results, with about eighty people brought to a confession of faith. He and his small fellowship group regularly met for Bible study and prayer and gradually came to hold Baptist convictions. By 1826 he confessed that he had doubts about infant baptism and refused to present his own child for that ceremony. He came to a place of desiring a baptism by immersion, but had no one to perform the rite for him. He wrote a letter to James Haldane of Edinburgh who was one of the directors of the Continental Society. Haldane advised him to baptize himself as John Smyth had done in Holland two centuries earlier. This advice led him to search the Scriptures to see if he could find an example of a person baptizing himself. Finding no biblical precedent he decided to wait for a “Philip” who would come to baptize him into his new faith.

During his years of waiting Oncken shared his story with an American sea captain, Calvin Tubbs, whom he met in Hamburg. Tubbs later reported the incident to the American Baptist Triennial Convention. An American professor, Barnas Sears, went to Germany on sabbatical in 1833 and made a point of contacting Oncken. After careful inquiries into the faith of seven persons, including the Onckens, Sears and the little band left Hamburg at midnight in a small row boat to a point several miles down the River Elbe from the city and there baptized them “under the friendly light of the stars” (Hervey, 1892:785). The next day Sears formed them into a church with Oncken as pastor. This became the oldest surviving Baptist church on the continent.

IV. EARLY GROWTH OF THE BAPTIST MOVEMENT

Oncken’s self-identification as a Baptist did not go unnoticed by the civil and religious authorities of Hamburg. He was also disowned by the missionary society under

which he had served and by the Independents generally (Torbet, 1950:172). Fortunately, the American Baptist Mission appointed him in 1835, together with one of his first converts, C. F. Lange, as their first missionaries to Germany. This was to set the pattern for future missionary work in Europe, with a preference for employing and assisting Europeans to carry forth their own Baptist witness (McBeth, 1987:469).

Oncken's appointment came with three basic directives: 1. Maintain public worship at Hamburg; 2. Distribute tracts and Bibles; 3. To preach in Bremen, Oldenburg and other towns in northern Germany. Oncken was outspoken in his proclamation of the gospel and soon the house in which his congregation was meeting was filled to capacity. News about this preacher of the "new English religion," as it was labeled by the people, spread like wild fire through the city and by the hundreds people would flock to him on appointed days to receive tracts.

In 1836 fourteen believers were baptized, one of whom, Julius Köbner, was to play the key role in the advancement of the work in Denmark, making several missionary journeys with Oncken and alone. Köbner, who was a Jew by birth, became the pastor of the first Baptist church of Copenhagen and the leader of the Danish Baptist movement (Ruden, 1979:79). He served as editor of the hymnbook still used by the Baptist churches in Germany and also prepared a hymnbook for the churches in Denmark, composing a number of the hymns himself. Early accounts of the Baptist worship services speak of many enthusiastically sung hymns, testimonies, fervent prayers and dynamic preaching. The contrast between this movement and the sober, intellectual services of the State churches would have been immediately apparent to anyone of that

day. In a real sense, here was a contextualized form of worship appropriate to the lower class people that the Baptist movement was attracting.

As the Baptist movement grew, so did its opposition. Eventually the senate of Hamburg issued a decree prohibiting Oncken from exercising religious functions. Immediately the American Baptist Convention Board and the Hamburg church sent letter of protest, but in 1840 Oncken was arrested and cast into prison. Another member of the church was also imprisoned for allowing a religious meeting in his house. Four weeks later they were set free but when Oncken arrived at his house he discovered that the police were selling his furniture in order to recover the costs of his arrest and keep while in prison.

The American and British Baptists continued to apply pressure through diplomatic channels on the government of Hamburg, pleading for religious freedom for the Baptists. Eventually their efforts led to legislation protecting the Baptists' freedom to worship in several European countries. The greatest breakthrough in the attitude of officials and the masses toward the Baptists took place during one of the great times of crisis in the city. In May 1842 a great fire swept through Hamburg leaving one third of the city's inhabitants homeless. The sacrificial service of Oncken and his congregation on behalf of the suffering citizens won the gratitude of the people and the city senate and prevented further acts of hostility.

The crisis of the Hamburg fire also provided a unique opportunity for the Baptists to spread their witness to other parts of Europe. Workers from other cities and even other countries flocked to Hamburg to take part in its reconstruction. Oncken and his associates saw this influx of temporary workers through missiological eyes and

proceeded to evangelize them with considerable success. When their jobs were completed many of the workers carried their new found Baptist faith back to their home towns and established churches there. Thus, the Baptist movement was largely spread by lay people who had experienced dislocation because of disaster and economic opportunities. From this point on, Oncken increased his travel in order to teach new believers and help them establish churches. At the same time he continued to serve the church in Hamburg. In the following years he had a role in establishing churches in Berlin, Breslau, Stettin, Bremen, Elbing, Memel, Kassel, Marburg, Bitterfield and Oldenburg. By 1845 there were 380 Baptists in Hamburg and in 1849 the first German Baptist Conference was held representing about 30 churches and 2,800 members.

In retrospect we can observe how Oncken's choice of Hamburg as the center of his ministry was strategic to its growth and spread to other parts of the country and the continent. Hamburg was a major center of commerce and transportation. From such a centre communication through literature could be far-reaching in its effects. The unstable social and economic conditions of the time were causing massive migration movements of Germans eastward. Large German communities were being established in Poland, Ukraine, Russia and the Baltic states. Rather than simply laboring for the growth of his own congregation, Oncken set his eyes much further afield. He devoted much time to visiting the ships that docked at Hamburg, distributing literature to the sailors and offering a verbal witness. One report states that three-fourths of the men baptized in Hamburg in the first 15 years of his ministry were traveling men. These helped spread the Baptist movement to many other nations.

In the fifty years that followed the organization of the Hamburg church, Baptist churches were established in Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Poland, Holland, Russia, Turkey, Austria, Romania, Australia, Bulgaria, Kamerun (West Africa) and the Baltic states. All of these were in some way connected to the church in Germany and a number of them were organized by Oncken himself or one of his close associates. The Union of Baptist Churches in Russia grew to become one of the strongest Baptist fellowships in Europe, thanks, in great measure to Oncken's seminal work with them (Woyke, 1979: 21). Frank Woyke related how a number of Russian farm workers employed by German Baptist settlers were baptized by Abraham Unger, who had been ordained by Oncken. These early Russian Baptists, in turn, began to reach out to other Russians (1979: 21). Across the Atlantic the North American Baptist Conference of Canada and the United States and the Convenção Batista Pioneira of Brazil were established by German-speaking immigrants who trace their spiritual heritage to Oncken.

When the Union of Baptist Churches in Germany was organized in 1849 missionary outreach was a primary concern. Oncken's best known motto was *Jeder Baptist ein Missionar* (Every Baptist, a Missionary). In its organizational charter each church was strongly recommended to establish a mission committee, to take up regular offerings for missions and participate in or organize large meetings emphasizing missions. Each committee was to meet monthly to discuss the best methods for reaching people for the kingdom of God. Each one of the four associations composing the Union was to send out and support missionaries. The charter admonished each church to create youth groups, to give them necessary instruction and deploy them in works of evangelism. Every tradesman was to proclaim the Gospel while working at his

occupation and, if he should need financial help to maintain his livelihood, he could receive aid from the missions fund (Wagner, 1972: 13, 14). This concept of the church and its ministry was truly revolutionary in its time and would even be so by today's standards.

V. CHARACTERISTICS OF ONCKEN'S METHODOLOGY

First and foremost Oncken was personally involved in obedience to the Great Commission. He could have occupied himself with pastoral responsibilities in his growing congregation, with administrative and educational work (he co-founded and taught in the Baptist Seminary in Hamburg) or even literary pursuits (he published the first regularly published Baptist paper in Europe, *Das Missionblatt*, yet his vision for lost men and women never dimmed and he continuously exercised his evangelistic gifts to win many into the kingdom.

Oncken was committed to literature distribution, finding it to be an effective way of disseminating the Gospel and spreading the Baptist movement. By the time he was 79 years old he reported that he had given out no less than two million Bibles in Europe (McBeth, 1987:471). He also established a printing press.

One of Oncken's special abilities was to select qualified people to lead the emerging congregations. Wherever he traveled he left a string of newly formed Baptist churches with workers whom he had selected and trained. In this he closely resembled the Apostle Paul's method of establishing churches and appointing elders to govern them. Some of those early leaders exercised vital roles in the expanding movement. Oncken visited these churches frequently and carried on a great deal of correspondence with

them. Also, in the early years he held classes for the pastors in Hamburg whenever he could. On one day in 1859, twelve men who had received instruction from Oncken in Hamburg, were ordained to the Baptist ministry (Merriam, 1913:195).

Women were also accorded a leadership role in the German Baptist churches, following the example of the English Baptists with the appointment of deaconesses. Deaconess houses were established where Baptist women devoted their lives to witness and ministry, primarily among the sick and needy. In time their work expanded to include orphanages, schools, hospitals, welfare centers and homes for the aged. In 1887 Haus Bethel was established to give order and direction to the deaconess ministry.

Of particular relevance to 21st century missiological realities is the way Oncken sought to spread the Gospel message through the natural movements of people, whether it be through the sailors who docked at Hamburg, migrant workers, or through the network of German settlers moving to other parts of Europe and beyond. Certainly in his example we see how one person's work with transient people ultimately led to the establishment of a multitude of churches scattered around the globe. By the time of his death in 1884 the German Union alone had grown to a membership of 16,000 in 96 churches.

IV. CONCLUSION

This rather brief examination of the life and ministry of Johann Oncken is but one case study illustrating the pivotal role migratory movements have played in the expansion of the church. In the case of the German Baptist movement, it was not haphazard or accidental. The success was the result of a combination of strategic thinking, zealous and tireless personal efforts, aligned with the larger forces of history and economics.

Spiritual dynamics should also not be minimized. The grass-roots, contextualized expression of church that empowered lay people in their ministry of proclamation and compassionate service made the transmission of the faith along the natural lines of personal and family contacts all that more effective. Indeed, we see similar elements and patterns at work in the great movements of Christian discipleship among scattered peoples in the 21st century. It is of vital importance that sound missiological strategy take into account the social dynamics of people movements, while being driven by ordinary, committed lay people who know the power and direction of the Holy Spirit.

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