

A German Pioneer Missionary

Ed Schmeltekopf

Baptists have a storied history which includes Johann Gerhard Oncken of Germany who lived from 1800 to 1884. He grew up in a Lutheran home, was influenced by Presbyterians in Scotland and was converted to Christ in a London Methodist church.

Oncken became involved immediately in an independent ministry of distributing tracts. Oncken seemed destined for a lifetime of Christian ministry.

He was appointed a missionary by the Continental Mission Society in Germany and settled down in Hamburg as a member of the English Reform Church. Oncken preached in small churches, and was also responsible for beginning Sunday School work in Germany.

The ministry of Oncken actually began soon after he was converted for he began sharing information about his conversion in printed materials. Oncken found that printing the message and distributing it was less objectionable than public preaching. Persecution increased when Oncken became a Baptist in 1834.

The police protected Oncken because there were threats against the Baptist church where he served. He was undeterred by imprisonment, fines and dispersion of his meetings by the military. Oncken refused to accommodate his persecutors. He continued preaching, starting churches and witnessing on street corners. Oncken stood strongly for the separation of church and state.

Oncken was a very effective preacher. As a result of his evangelistic preaching, churches grew. Oncken started preaching as an agent of the interdenominational Continental Society. He was sent to Hamburg, which he called "a second Sodom." He did not start as a representative of Baptists but more as a freelance revivalist preacher.

Eventually, more favorable circumstances came and the followers of Oncken accelerated their missionary activity. By 1851 there were 41 churches with a combined membership of 3,746 persons.

The theological beliefs of Oncken were expressed in the confession of 1847. The autonomy of each local church and baptism by immersion of believers were basic in the Calvinist/leaning reformation statement. There was a pietistic and missionary focus that impacted the theological direction. Oncken

believed that every church should be missionary. The principles of Baptist theology were such things as necessity for spiritual conversion, priesthood of all believers, the rejection of infant baptism as a Christian practice and the priority of missions and evangelism. Religious liberty and separation of church and state were basic to Oncken.

Much of what Baptists believe today has its origin in the beliefs of Johann Gerhard Oncken.



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