

JOHANN GERHARD ONCKEN'S LONG ROAD TO TOLERATION

WAYNE ALAN DETZLER*

Although German theology often has given creative impulses to American religious life, in the establishment of the German Baptist association that flow was reversed. The point of entry through whom Baptist principles gained access to modern Europe was Johann Gerhard Oncken.

Born in Varel, Germany, in 1800, Oncken emigrated at the age of fourteen to Leith, Scotland. Later, while working in London, he came under the influence of Methodism, which inspired a new earnestness in his religious experience. In consequence of this he traveled in 1823 to Hamburg as an agent of the Continental (missionary) Society, in which capacity he formed one of the first Sunday schools in Germany.¹

By 1829 Oncken's spiritual journey had led him to consider seriously the matter of believers' baptism. Concerning this he found little help in Germany, and this drove him to make contact with Robert Haldane, a founder of the Continental Society. In response Haldane recommended that Oncken should baptize himself, as the early English Baptist John Smyth had done.²

Because Oncken could discover no Biblical precedent for autobaptism, he contacted Joseph Ivimey, an English Baptist historian. The author's advice, however, was scarcely better. He invited Oncken to come to London and be baptized in the Eagle Street Baptist Church, of which Ivimey was the pastor.³

In the autumn of 1829 providence brought a Baptist layman into the home of Johann and Sarah Oncken. When an early frost closed the harbor at Hamburg, Calvin Tubbs' ship was stranded for six months in the seaport city. Captain Tubbs and his ship came from Philadelphia, where he was a member of the Sansom Street Baptist Church. In Hamburg Tubbs sought fellowship with likeminded people, and during the winter he instructed Oncken and his tiny band of believers in Baptist principles from the NT. Assessing the role of Tubbs, Thomas Armitage wrote:

During his stay, Tubbs and Oncken spent much of their time in examining the New Testament, and the Captain explained to him the doctrine and practices of the American Baptist Churches. Oncken was convinced that these

* Wayne Detzler is a research fellow at Yale Divinity School and is senior pastor at Calvary Baptist Church, 262 Bee Street, Meriden, CT 06450.

¹ O. Eggenberger, "Johann Gerhard Oncken," *RGG* 4 (1960) 1631.

² J. H. Cooke, *Johann Gerhard Oncken: His Life and Work* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1908) 57.

³ *Licht und Recht: Eine Sammlung von Preidigten und Reden gehalten von J. G. Oncken* (ed. H. Windolf; Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1901) 235. J. Ivimey wrote *A History of the English Baptists* in four volumes (1811-30).

Churches were modeled after the Gospel pattern, and expressed his wish to be immersed on his faith in Christ.⁴

Tubbs volunteered to seek help for Oncken, and he told his pastor about the young German. It was not until 1833, however, that Oncken again had an American visitor. During that summer Professor Barnas Sears traveled to Germany. At the behest of the American Baptist Missionary Union, Sears paid a visit to Oncken.⁵

Sears was a graduate of Brown University and was ordained to the Baptist ministry in 1827. Soon he commenced teaching at the Hamilton Literary and Theological Institution in New York, the predecessor of Colgate University. After studying in Europe, Sears was named successively president of Newton Theological Seminary and Brown University.⁶

Although Sears came to Hamburg in 1833, Oncken was in the process of departing for Warsaw. Thus the winter passed before Sears was able to baptize Oncken and his half-dozen friends in April 1834. The ceremony took place in the dead of night along the Hanover shore of the Elba River, safely out of the reach of the Hamburg authorities.⁷

Immediately following the baptism Sears presided over the founding of the first Baptist church in modern Europe. He approved their statement of faith and the church covenant, and he extended to them the right hand of fellowship. The church called Oncken to be its first pastor, and Sears ordained him then and there. This occurred despite Oncken's total lack of theological education.

The fledgling church was attached, however loosely, to the Hudson Valley Baptist Association, of which Sears was a member. Sears then issued Oncken this ordination certificate:

This is to testify to all whom it may concern, that, at the request of the Baptist Church in this place, after being fully satisfied of your personal piety, of the correctness of your views of Christian doctrine, of your possessing those ministerial qualifications specified in the scripture, and of your being called both by the Spirit and Providence of God to the work of the ministry, I have by prayer and the imposition of hands solemnly set you apart to that responsible office; and in the name of the church in which I hold an official standing as a regular ordained minister, pronounce you scripturally invested with all the powers which belong to a pastor of the flock of Christ and to a minister of the gospel.⁸

Singlehandedly Sears baptized believers, organized a church, ordained Oncken, and received the church into association with the American Baptists. Almost immediately he petitioned the American Baptist Missionary Union 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

⁴ T. Armitage, *A History of the Baptists* (New York: Bryan, Taylor, 1887) 827-828.

⁵ *Annual Report of the American Baptist Missionary Union* 20 (1834) 23.

⁶ "Barnas Sears," *Who Was Who in America: Historical Volume* (Chicago: A. N. Marquis, 1963) 472.

⁷ J. Lehmann, *Geschichte der deutschen Baptisten* (Hamburg: J. G. Oncken, 1896) 46.

⁸ Oncken Archives MS, Hamburg, April 23, 1834.

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.⁹

The annual report of the American Baptist Missionary Union indicated that "a moderate sum of money" had been sent to Sears for Oncken. The credibility of Oncken was endorsed by professors Friedrich August Tholuck (Halle), Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (Berlin) and August Hahn (Breslau), all of whom were in the vanguard of conservative theological thought.

The establishment of a Baptist church at Hamburg, however, produced no public acceptance of the Baptists. Neither did the ordination of Oncken at the hand of Barnas Sears guarantee religious toleration. In fact eight years would pass before any semblance of tolerance would be granted to the German Baptists, and that acceptance would be tenuous and local at best.

The senior Lutheran clergyman of Hamburg, A. J. Rambach, spoke for most Germans when he called Oncken and his church "a fanatical Anabaptist sect."¹⁰ The sectarian image faded only after being bathed in the sweat of Baptist pioneers.

Like a pall, history hung heavily over the heads of the Baptists on the continent of Europe. Remote historical events had predisposed many Europeans against the Baptists, even though the Baptists were largely ignorant of the events and powerless to change them.

Three major obstacles blocked the road to tolerance: (1) The Baptists were identified with the polygamists of sixteenth-century Münster, (2) their ecclesiology diverged markedly from the norm of the religious establishment, and (3) the Conventicle Laws rendered Baptist gatherings illegal.

I. THE MEMORY OF MÜNSTER

As the Reformation reached its peak, some Anabaptists veered off into an extreme form of utopianism. Jan Mattys and Jan of Leyden led 1,700 men and 5,000 to 6,000 women to the walled city of Münster, where they aimed to establish a theocratic kingdom in preparation for the dawn of Christ's millennial reign.

Rather than erecting a holy city, the leaders fell victim to their own unholy lust for power and women. The Bishop of Waldeck together with Protestant troops laid siege to the city, bringing to an ignominious end this strange experiment on June 24, 1535.¹¹

In his Rylands Lectures at Manchester in 1969 and 1970 Basil Hall described thoroughly the revolutionary character of the Anabaptist experiment

⁹ *Annual Report of the American Baptist Missionary Union* 22 (1836) 27.

¹⁰ *Hamburger Akten zu den Anfängen des deutschen Baptismus* (unpublished typescript; ed. W. Mecklenberg and H. Luckey; Hamburg, 1933) 74. The sectarian label persisted as a burden to the Baptists until well into this century.

¹¹ L. F. von Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Vienna: Phaidon, n.d.) 249-253.

at Münster. Hall connected the Anabaptists with nonconforming Lutheran preacher Bernhard Rothmann and social reformer Bernard Knipperdolling. Rothmann and Knipperdolling had created an atmosphere in which the Anabaptists could indulge in a variety of theological and sociological experiments. Theirs was a quest for the golden age of the Davidic kingdom in Israel, complete with the king's moral quirks.¹²

Although the Anabaptist remnants in northern Europe, especially the Mennonites, bore no resemblance to their fanatical, historical cousins, the European establishment never forgot Münster. The sobriety of British and American Baptists also could not eradicate the memory of the Münster fiasco.

The memory was fanned into flame when Leopold von Lücken of Zahnstorf near Mecklenberg refused to have his daughter Marie baptized. In 1830 he protested that infant baptism was not Biblical and thus should be rejected. Soon von Lücken and his family underwent baptism at the hand of Danish lay preacher Carl von Bülow.

An irrational response to von Lücken was recorded by Georg Christian Krome, who was the Lutheran pastor of Neukloster during the period of 1827 to 1832. Krome feared the eruption of fanaticism like that at Münster, and he succeeded in frightening the faithful for years to come.¹³

Not only were von Lücken and von Bülow Baptist in their practice. They were also universalists who believed that all would ultimately attain salvation, whether or not they accepted the efficacy of Christ's atoning death.¹⁴

In character and conviction Oncken differed totally from von Lücken and von Bülow, for he was a true son of British and American evangelicalism. Having experienced a sudden, Wesley-like conversion at Great Queen Street Methodist Chapel in London, Oncken also preached the necessity of this experience.

The influences that moved Oncken to adopt a Baptist position were not von Lücken and von Bülow, even though the latter was supported by the Continental Society.¹⁵ Oncken was independent of von Bülow, since most agents of the Continental Society were unconnected to each other. Oncken adopted a Baptist viewpoint because of the influence of American Baptists such as Tubbs and Sears. It was their serious, Scriptural approach that laid the basis for Baptists in Europe.

In defending the German Baptists, Philip Schaff reflected on his experience in America:

The *Baptists*, who excite considerable attention in Germany at the present time, are not the descendants of those wild fanatics of the sixteenth century,

¹² B. Hall, "The Reformation City," *BJRL* 54 (1971) 126-135.

¹³ One is indebted to H. F. Beneke, the ecclesiastical historian of Hamburg, for reproducing the letters of Krome in "Baptistische Bestrebungen zu Hamburg," *Hamburgische Kirchenzeitung* (November 1924) 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (December 1925) 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (November 1924) 13.

who preached and practised anarchical doctrines, and were so vigorously opposed by Luther and all the Reformers, but of a recent date, and we may say of English and American origin.¹⁶

Although Schaff and indeed several German scholars saw a clear difference between the modern Baptists and their Anabaptist ancestors, the Lutheran establishment was seized by Münster mania. For almost a decade Oncken suffered from this fallacious identification, and indeed suspicions of sectarianism dogged the German Baptists for another hundred years.

II. THE IRRECONCILABLE ECCLESIOLOGY

If the first barrier to toleration was historical, the second was theological. The Baptists held to an ecclesiology that was fundamentally divergent from that of both the Protestant and Catholic establishments.

From the Wittenberg crisis of 1521 onward the Anabaptists had confounded and confused the majority. Ernest Payne, the dean of British Baptists, dug deeply into the foundations of the Baptists when he wrote:

It was Michael Sattler, a former monk and follower of the Swiss Anabaptist Conrad Grebel, who in 1526 formulated seven articles of faith. These included adult baptism, the autonomy of the local congregation, the "gathered church" of baptized believers, closed communion, excommunication of offenders and the rejection of human supremacy both in religion and politics.¹⁷

One could see several causes of conflict between the established churches and Oncken. Obviously the concept of a "gathered church" stood out in bold contrast to the "territorial church."

The autonomy of each congregation was equally offensive, as was the independence of the church from secular and ecclesiastical authorities. This led to conflict with the senate at Hamburg and to the violation of the Conventicle Laws, which I will discuss later.

Although several doctrines aroused opposition from German religious and civil authorities, it was believers' baptism that proved to be most offensive. Various lines of attack were followed in combatting this essential Baptist doctrine.

A. J. Rambach of Hamburg declared that baptism by immersion was immoral. He had heard that female candidates were baptized wearing only a "white nightgown." Equally alarming was the rumor that young men wore only their undergarments and a white duster coat as they underwent baptism. The rumors were never proven to substantiate claims of immorality, and the truth of the rumors was never established.

Against the renegade von Bülow it was asserted that he baptized one Frau Müller in her bathtub. Only Müller was in the bathtub, and von Bülow

¹⁶ P. Schaff, *Germany: Its Universities, Theology, and Religion* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1857) 139.

¹⁷ E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Movement in the Reformation and Onwards* (London: Kingsgate, 1947) 13.

in all probability stood alongside. Von Bülow derived his authority to baptize from a real or imagined ordination by the Continental Society.¹⁸ Although von Bülow trod the fanatical edges of Baptist ecclesiology, charges of immorality were probably more fanciful than factual.

Due to the questionable nature of such criticism, Oncken zealously defended the practice of believers' baptism. "We rejoice that Jesus was the first Baptist," Oncken was heard to say. He also claimed "that all the Apostles and all Christians in the apostolic age were baptized exactly as we were."¹⁹ Of course it is a colossal leap of logic to make all who were baptized as believers into confessional Baptists. Strange attacks sometime elicit strange defenses.

Oncken rejected any shortcuts to what he considered proper Biblical baptism. Although he respected the Scottish revival teacher and cofounder of the Continental Society, Robert Haldane, Oncken rejected Haldane's suggestion of autobaptism.²⁰

Likewise Oncken refused the invitation of Ivimey to be baptized at London's Eagle Street Baptist Church. This would have taken him away from Hamburg for up to two months and thus eroded his ministry to the small band of Baptists who were just finding their identity in Hamburg.²¹

So crucial was the act of baptism that Oncken waited for the right moment in which to be baptized. That moment came with the arrival of Barnas Sears in Hamburg. Indeed the event of the first baptism heralded the birth, or rebirth, of Baptist churches in Germany and indeed in most of northern Europe.²²

But, the service that began as a clandestine rite had to continue to be so for several years. It was the only means of avoiding disruption and persecution.²³ Oncken's colleagues also followed the same pattern of secret baptisms. When they were apprehended in the act of baptizing, imprisonment of both the celebrant and the candidates often ensued.²⁴

Although the most obvious point of conflict was believers' baptism, however, a second doctrinal issue also caused persecution for the Baptists: their reliance on lay leadership. While calling them deacons, Oncken allowed laypeople to carry out many religious functions. This provoked severe criticism from the Protestant religious authorities.²⁵

¹⁸ H. F. Beneke, *Hamburgische Kirchenzeitung* (January 1925) 5; *ibid.* (February 1925) 13. Incidentally the information concerning the Continental Society rests on one or two volumes of its annual reports in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

¹⁹ *Licht* (ed. Windolf) 238.

²⁰ Cooke, *Oncken* 57.

²¹ *Licht* (ed. Windolf) 235; Cooke, *Oncken* 58.

²² H. Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus* (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1958) 12–13.

²³ W. A. Detzler, *British and American Contributions to the Erweckung in Germany, 1815–1848* (dissertation; Manchester, 1974) 248.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 252. Cf. G. Balders, "Werden und Wirken von Glaubensbekenntnissen," *Wort und Tat* 25 (January 1971) 11–12; *Hamburger Akten* (ed. Mecklenberg and Luckey) 95–102.

²⁵ This practice is still current among some European Baptists, who have neither the financial nor the personnel resources to serve all of the preaching stations with paid ministers.

It was not the title of deacon that disturbed the German religious establishment but the scope of ministry that Oncken allotted to lay people. Consider, for instance, the story of Johannes Carl Friedrich Lange. Born in 1800 (Oncken's birth year), Lange had been virtually orphaned at the age of eight. He was sent to the island of Helgoland where he began to work for an English physician.

In an obituary for Lange, Oncken described the "wild youth" of Lange:

Dancing was his great delight, and he told me, that he was so intent on satisfying his passion for this, that he determined to have it to the full, even at the expense of shortening his life. He danced so long and so much, that ultimately he was taken dangerously ill to the hospital.²⁶

Actually Lange was probably more a victim of malnutrition and exhaustion than of the ravages of dancing.

In 1823 Oncken met Lange, and soon thereafter Lange and his brother Dietrich experienced an evangelical conversion. By 1828 Lange was well established as a lay assistant to Oncken and was given a small stipend by the Edinburgh Bible Society. In addition to his regular employment as a shoemaker, Lange also supervised Bible colportage for Oncken.²⁷

When the city of Hamburg was swept by fire in 1842, Lange organized the Baptists to give relief. It must be noted, however, that Lange's work was only practical. He neither preached nor distributed communion.

A second active layman was the Danish Jew Julius Köbner. He had converted to Lutheranism in 1826 when he married a Gentile, Juliana von Schröter. Ten years later Oncken baptized Köbner. (It should be noted that even one who had been baptized as an adult was required to be re-baptized by immersion in order to become a Baptist.)²⁸

Without the benefit of formal theological education, Köbner took on a formative role in defining Baptist beliefs. In 1837 he was apprehended in the very act of baptizing. The Senate of Hamburg ordered him to submit a doctrinal statement, in which he also explained the liturgy and sacramental practices of Baptists as well as the marriages performed by Baptists and children born to church members.

In his statement Köbner drew careful lines of distinction. Although the Baptists followed the baptismal practice of the Mennonites, they were not pacifists. Their view of soteriology was like that of the Reformed Church, but they were not pedobaptists.²⁹ Both the Mennonites and the Reformed Church were tolerated in Hamburg, but neither was as aggressive in evangelism as the Baptists were.

Nevertheless communion, baptism, marriage and burial are usually carried out by ordained ministers.

²⁶ *The Primitive Church Magazine* 6 (February 1850) 58. This was the organ of the Strict and Particular Baptists.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 59.

²⁸ R. Donat, *Das wachsende Werk* (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1960) 43-44. This conclusion was confirmed by Köbner's daughter, Ruth Barasel, in her biography, *Julius Köbner: Sein Leben* (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1930) 45.

²⁹ Balders, "Werden" 11-12.

When Oncken was away from the Hamburg church it was Köbner who stepped into the pulpit. In 1840 when Oncken was imprisoned for violating the Conventicle Laws, Köbner assumed leadership of the Hamburg church. He devised a novel way of reporting to Oncken. Using his skills as an engraver, Köbner wrote an extensive report on a tiny piece of thin paper. The note was then carefully rolled up and placed in a hollowed-out bread roll (*Brötchen*). Unfortunately the note was intercepted by the chief of police, Senator Binder, who held it as evidence against Oncken.³⁰

Köbner assumed the major role of theologian and associate pastor at Hamburg before 1840. He preached and carried out the ordinance of baptism, and probably also communion. It was not until 1844, however, that Köbner was ordained.³¹ The latitude that Oncken gave to Köbner was a serious source of irritation to both the Senate of Hamburg and the established Lutheran Church.

Lange and Köbner devoted their energies to building up the church in Hamburg. A third layman, Gottfried Wilhelm Lehmann, was pioneer of the Baptist church in Berlin. In 1837 Oncken had baptized the first seven Berlin Baptists at Rummelsberger See. From among the first converts Lehmann was chosen to be pastor of the Berlin church.³²

Lehmann contributed greatly to the literature of the Baptists in Germany. He translated many of the more lively hymns from English into German and popularized them through frequent use at Berlin.³³ He also translated the work of R. Pengilly on baptism, a standard that was published in England in 1809 and ran into ten editions by 1836.³⁴ Pengilly's book was a formative influence among English-speaking Baptists, and Lehmann insured a similar role among German readers by publishing his translation in 1839.

All this Lehmann accomplished before his ordination in 1840. Oncken had come to see the value of strengthening ties to the British Baptists, so he advised Lehmann to seek ordination in London. On June 29, 1840, Lehmann was ordained at Salters Hall Chapel in Cannon Street, London. Six English pastors took part, and the dedicatory prayer was offered by J. H. Hinton, secretary of the English Baptist Union.³⁵

Within one year of his ordination Lehmann saw the Berlin church grow to more than a hundred in number. His house could no longer contain the congregation, and a room was leased in the city. Lehmann petitioned the British Baptists to help furnish the chapel, and financial assistance was forthcoming. By 1842 attendance had swelled to more than three hundred.³⁶

³⁰ Luckey, *Oncken* 174–176. A reproduction of the note appears opposite p. 224.

³¹ Barasel, *Köbner* 59.

³² Oncken Archives MS, "Copies of Johann Gerhard Oncken's Letters to the American Baptist Missionary Society," Boston University, August 10, 1837.

³³ Donat, *Werk* 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 88. R. Pengilly was a Baptist pastor in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Beyond this little is known about him.

³⁵ Oncken Archives MS, "Dahlemer Akten" 6.69–70. A copy of the ordination certificate was reproduced from the archives of the Dahlem district of Berlin.

³⁶ *The Baptist Magazine* 33 (November 1841); 34 (May 1842) 248.

In addition to Lange, Köbner and Lehmann, the German Baptists relied on numbers of unnamed laypeople to carry on a growing Sunday school. By 1845 there were forty members in the Hamburg Sunday school, and these were taught by laypeople.³⁷ This stands out in contrast to the Lutherans, whose school program led by Johann Hinrich Wichern was manned largely by theological students. Wichern's program was called *Rauhes Haus* ("Rough House").³⁸

The active involvement of laypeople in leading the Baptist churches and their Sunday schools was a source of considerable opposition. In May 1843 Oncken was jailed for a period of four days on the charge of administering the sacraments without proper ordination. Obviously, Oncken's ordination by Sears carried with it no legal standing in Hamburg.

Although Oncken was imprisoned in 1843, already the city of Hamburg had begun to feel the warm breeze of liberal reform. Oncken was released rather quickly, and Police Chief Binder made a public announcement of the Baptist pastor's release with this statement: "I am anxious to give in every possible way publicity to this, as in justice I am bound to do."³⁹

The theological barriers to tolerance did not fall in 1843, or even with the revolution of 1848. The religious establishment would lag behind the political and philosophical changes for many years to come. Misunderstandings, mistrust, and even misrepresentation would long persist.

III. THE CONFLICT WITH THE CONVENTICLE LAWS

In the wake of Waterloo a wave of political and philosophical conservatism inundated Europe. Suspect were all sorts of liberalizing influences, and this was most evident in the alliance between the altar and the throne. Both the established Church and the monarchy feared a loss of influence. In various small German kingdoms the throne propped up the altar, just as the Church supported the monarchy. The Senate of Hamburg took a similar stance in the attempt to put down all forms of religious nonconformity.

This pattern became evident even before Oncken and the Baptists came together. Carl von Bülow was tried for violations of the Conventicle Laws in Hamburg. The Conventicle Laws in post-Napoleonic Germany clearly paralleled the acts promulgated in England by the Cavalier Parliament under Charles II in 1664. No more than five persons could meet for religious purposes at any time unless a clergyman of the established Church were present.

Von Lücken also ran afoul of the Conventicle Acts. In Mecklenberg he had been granted permission to conduct so-called *devotio domestica* (home devotions). When the meetings were held at the same time as services in the Lutheran church, police pursued von Lücken. They almost caught him

³⁷ *The Baptist Reporter* 2 (November 1845) 382.

³⁸ Reports of Wichern's work are contained in *Fliegende Blätter aus dem Rauhen Haus* (Hamburg, 1845 and onwards).

³⁹ Oncken Archives ms, "The Journal of Johann Gerhard Oncken," May 3, 1843.

in Hamburg, but he swam across the Elba River to safety on the Hanover shore. In 1831 he was arraigned at Mecklenberg, but all charges were dropped when he undertook to quit the province within a fortnight.⁴⁰

Knowing of this precedent, Oncken appealed to the practice of *devotio domestica* as the basis for the Baptist meetings held in his Hamburg home. The Senate, however, saw a significant difference between family devotions and the establishment of a Baptist church. They never accepted Oncken's plea for *devotio domestica*.⁴¹

In fact a report had been submitted to Senator Carl Sieveking as early as 1838 stating that Oncken had denied the validity of infant baptism and set up a "Baptist Conventicle." This, argued the complainant, would be the forerunner of the state-Church separation known in America.⁴² The petitioner argued further that these meetings were a blatant contravention of the Augsburg Confession, which laid down the legal parameters of religious practice. The Baptist meetings also were seen as evidence of contempt for civil authorities.⁴³

The situation was frozen in 1839 when the senior Lutheran pastor of Hamburg, A. J. Rambach, persuaded the Senate to pass laws that specifically prohibited the conduct of either Baptist or Methodist worship in Hamburg. Thus the Conventicle Law was given local expression in a direct attempt to thwart the work of Oncken and his Baptists.⁴⁴

In May and June 1840 Oncken was incarcerated at the notorious Winterbaum prison in Hamburg. Köbner and Lange had also been arrested. Their pockets were searched as if they were common criminals. Oncken was interrogated about the communion services that had been held. Oncken and his friends held communion weekly, whereas the established Church had communion much less frequently.

On May 30 Sarah Oncken appealed to the police chief for the release of her husband because their daughter Lydia was seriously ill. Senator Binder declared himself willing to release Oncken if the latter agreed not to preach. Such a guarantee was impossible for Oncken to give. He felt duty-bound to continue his preaching, even at the risk of future imprisonments.⁴⁵

On June 11, 1840, Oncken was granted an unconditional release. It was assumed, at least by Binder, that Oncken would spend his time at the bedside of his by now mortally ill child. Instead he traveled to Copenhagen, where on June 25 he baptized seven. One day later Lydia died.⁴⁶

Soon after this incident, however, the Conventicle Laws began to erode. They finally fell during the revolution of 1848. On March 13 nine hundred property holders met in Hamburg for a town meeting. Oncken was among them. One of the issues before them was religious liberty. The citizens

⁴⁰ H. F. Beneke, *Hamburgische Kirchenzeitung* (May 1925) 36-38; (June 1925) 46.

⁴¹ *Annual Report of the American Baptist Missionary Union* 26 (1840) 12.

⁴² *Hamburger Akten* (ed. Mecklenberg and Luckey) 131.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 130.

⁴⁴ H. G. Bergemann, *Staat und Kirche in Hamburg während 19. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: F. Wittig, 1958) 43.

⁴⁵ *Licht* (ed. Windolf) 250-252.

⁴⁶ Luckey, *Oncken* 179.

voted overwhelmingly to separate Church and state. Each citizen would be guaranteed freedom of religion.⁴⁷ The vote in Hamburg was nearly unanimous, and the Conventicle Laws collapsed under the weight of enlightened public opinion.

Although the legal barriers to freedom had fallen, the cultural obstacles would remain for many years. Still, the theological issues would clash with the popular perceptions of both Lutherans and Catholics. Even the mention of Munster would fade slowly. But the legal rights of Baptists were validated in 1848. Their freedom was won by unusual means.

IV. THE FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM

During 1842 the tide of public opinion turned suddenly in favor of Oncken. It was not reasonable debate that caused this. Debate and discussion had fallen victim to crude repression by civil authorities. Furthermore neither Oncken nor his friends placed much stock in debate.

Nor was it Oncken's preaching that procured the liberty. In fact non-Baptists seldom if ever heard Oncken preach. If they had, their presuppositions would still have hampered a meeting of the minds.

Nor did the appeals of Baptists in Britain and America gain freedom for their German coreligionists. In 1840 British ministers Hoby and Ackworth sailed to Hamburg, where they presented to the Senate a petition endorsed by both Queen Victoria and Lord Palmerston. Their gesture had no effect at all.⁴⁸

Senator Binder told Hoby that the Baptists were "a wretched fellowship collected from the lowest classes of society." Hoby responded, "I perceive that you have two standards here: one for the rich and one for the poor."⁴⁹

One year later the American and Foreign Bible Society, a Baptist agency, sent another petition to the Senate of Hamburg. They flattered the senators by commending their city as an enlightened place. Furthermore the Americans reminded them of Oncken's contributions to Hamburg. He had established the first Sunday school, and he had also instituted the Lower Saxony Tract Society. The Americans asserted that Oncken was an honor to the city of Hamburg.

Then the American Baptists argued that since Lutherans have freedom in America, Baptists should have the same privilege in Hamburg. Their appeal was as laudable as it was ineffective.⁵⁰

In 1841 the Quaker reformer Elizabeth Fry visited Hamburg, where she said, "No rights are to be so solemnly respected as the rights of conscience.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the American Baptist Missionary Union* 34 (1848) 86 No longer was the established Church a *Staatskirche* (state Church) From that point onward it would be called a *Volkskirche* (people's Church) or *Landeskirche* (territorial Church)

⁴⁸ *The Baptist Magazine* 32 (October 1840) 526-527

⁴⁹ J Hoby, *Narrative of a Visit to Christian Brethren, in Hamburg, Copenhagen, etc* (London Houlston and Stoneman, 1844) 73-74, Lehmann, *Geschichte* 88

⁵⁰ *Annual Report of the American and Foreign Bible Society* 4 (1841) 62-65

Consequently, there is nothing so hateful as the spirit of bigotry and persecution."⁵¹

In retrospect Fry asserted that greater freedom had already been granted in Hamburg. Meanwhile in Berlin King Frederick Wilhelm IV had made the Baptists "a wholly tolerated sect."⁵² About the same time the British Baptists applauded the toleration granted in Prussia and pleaded for a general acceptance to be granted to German Baptists.⁵³

It was not rational persuasion that gave freedom to the Baptists but rather an altogether catastrophic event. During the night of May 5, 1842, a fire broke out in Hamburg. Within seventy-two hours 2,000 homes had been destroyed. Fully one-fifth of the city's 150,000 residents were rendered homeless. More than a hundred were injured, and almost half that number lost their lives.⁵⁴

Under the leadership of Johannes Lange, the Hamburg Baptists housed forty-five refugees. Food and clothing was readily provided, and no effort or expense was spared in giving aid to the homeless. A warehouse that had been earmarked for a future place of worship was hastily converted into temporary shelter.⁵⁵

Almost immediately after the Hamburg fire, public opinion and governmental policy toward the Baptists changed. When in 1843 rowdies vandalized the Baptists' property, Police Chief Binder came to the aid of the church. Oncken wrote in his journal:

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.⁵⁶

When democracy dawned in 1848, there were 1,500 Baptists in Germany and twenty-six congregations.⁵⁷ Because no Baptists took part in the uprising of 1848, Binder praised them with this accolade:

Mr. Oncken, your conduct and that of all your members has been so noble, that we must give you all you ask, and henceforth, anything I can do to serve you I shall be happy to do.⁵⁸

In assessing this happy emancipation, I must give the last word to Barnas Sears, who ushered in the first Baptist church in modern Europe. After 1848 Sears wrote: "The great battle for religious liberty in Germany has been fought over the bodies of our Baptist missionaries."⁵⁹

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 5 (1842) 48-49.

⁵² E. G. De Bunsen, *Elizabeth Fry's Journey on the Continent 1840-41* (London: John Lane, 1931) 147.

⁵³ *The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer* 22 (May 1842) 46; *Annual Report of the American Baptist Missionary Union* 30 (1844) 49 n.

⁵⁴ *The Times* (London; 12-23 May 1842, 1 June 1842).

⁵⁵ *The Primitive Church Magazine* 2 (July 1842) 192.

⁵⁶ Oncken Archives MS, "The Journal of Johann Gerhard Oncken" (May 3, 1843).

⁵⁷ J. H. Rushbrooke, *The Baptist Movement on the Continent of Europe* (London: Carey, 1915) 18.

⁵⁸ Cooke 78.

⁵⁹ *The Baptist Record and Biblical Repository* 5 (October 1848) 545.