

Communities of Conviction

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When Tony Peck, the General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation (EBF), asked me to consider writing a book on Baptist beginnings as part of the celebration of 400 years of Baptist life in Europe I was very happy to agree. It has been inspiring to trace the stories that have contributed to the Baptist communities which we have today across Europe and the Middle East.

In recent years we have had the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the way in which Baptists across the continent emerged and how they belong together. This belonging is powerfully expressed in the work of the EBF and the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague. In writing the book I have drawn on published material and on work done by students within the Institute of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies at IBTS. Rich resources are at our disposal.

The EBF staff involved in the project – especially Tony Peck and Helle Liht - have been of enormous help. Thank you. I am also greatly indebted to the support of Dr Keith Jones, Rector of IBTS. My hope is that this book about beginnings, often imaginative beginnings, will play a part in encouraging similarly imaginative discipleship today. In this presentation I am going to highlight twelve themes that were important in beginnings across Europe.

The first theme is baptism itself. Here I want to go back to events more than 400 years ago.

On 21 January 1525 dramatic events took place in Zürich, Switzerland, which were described by someone who was probably an eye-witness. A group of people had gathered in the home of Felix Mantz, and they united in prayer for God's guidance. The account reads:

After the prayer, George of the House of Jacob stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God's sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad Grebel baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained minister to perform such a work.

This event has commonly been taken to mark the beginning of the Anabaptist movement.

Apart from the Anabaptist circle in Zürich there were others in the 1520s who became part of the Anabaptist movement - in Switzerland and Germany. One was Balthasar Hubmaier, a former Catholic priest and influential teacher and preacher at Regensburg Cathedral who became the leading theological thinker among the Anabaptists. Moving from Germany, Hubmaier became the leader of a large Anabaptist community centred in Nicolsburg (today Mikulov, in the Czech Republic), and in his brief ministry he probably baptised at least 2,000 people.

Anabaptism also owes a great deal to a very significant leader, Menno Simons, whose name was used to designate the Mennonites. It is now that we make a link to the beginnings here in Amsterdam – when the Baptist movement of which we are a part began.

John Smyth is often referred to in older historical writings as the ‘self-Baptist’, the one who baptised himself. The theme of baptism remains very important. This baptism in 1609 marks the beginning of the subsequent movement of Baptist churches.

But another theme I want to stress is that of the church. These early Baptists were asking – what is the true church?

John Smyth had studied for Anglican priesthood at Christ’s College, Cambridge, where there was a strong Puritan influence. By 1606 he had decided to separate from the Church of England – to join a church of committed believers, the Separatists (who separated from the Church of England). This church was seeking to give the congregation responsibility for seeking God’s will. Baptist roots, then, were in new thinking about the church. The idea of covenant was central. Separatists joined together ‘as the Lord’s free people’ and ‘by a covenant of the Lord’ into a church, to ‘walk in his ways’.

Smyth was a friend of Thomas Helwys, a lawyer, in Nottinghamshire. Helwys had studied at the Inns of Court, London. A new Separatist congregation in Gainsborough, of which Smyth and Helwys were part, was probably formed in the spring of 1607. Such congregations were illegal. After the arrest of some members, including Joan Helwys, the wife of Thomas, a group from Gainsborough, including Smyth and Thomas Helwys, decided to move to the Netherlands to escape from the persecution of religious ‘dissenters’.

The group, now led by Smyth, began to meet in rooms in a former bakery of the Dutch East India Company, owned by a Mennonite, Jan Munter. These Bakehouse premises had a central hall where meals and worship could take place.

A number of the members of Smyth’s congregation soon became deeply involved in discussion about whether it was right to baptise infants. The conclusion that they reached was that according to the New Testament baptism was to be carried out only on the basis of repentance and faith. This was Mennonite practice. There was influence from the Mennonites. Smyth baptised himself, and following that baptised Helwys and the rest of the congregation.

By early 1610 Smyth had decided to apply to join the local Mennonites and soon thirty-one members of the Smyth/Helwys group made application. Helwys and others, however, decided to return to England. They probably returned in late 1611 and established a Baptist church in Spitalfields, outside the city of London, in 1612 - the first Baptist church on English soil. This was a church of disciples of Christ – a gathering church. It was not a parish church. This was a new way of being church.

A third crucial theme was that of religious freedom.

The ideas that Thomas Helwys was developing about church and state and religious freedom were embodied in a book which he published in the same year as the Spitalfields church was established. This book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, gave religious toleration the finest defence it had received in England. The ‘earthly sword’ had no authority in the realm of faith.

In some of the most famous words of the *Short Declaration*, Helwys announced that ‘men’s religion to God is betwixt God and themselves... Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure’.

Thomas Helwys was, however, not destined to see the fruit of his call for religious liberty. He wrote, significantly, that he and his group had returned from Amsterdam ‘to lay down their lives in their own country for Christ and his truth’. Helwys was imprisoned in the dreadful Newgate Prison in London and died there.

A fourth theme is Baptist debate and diversity

A fresh Baptist impetus came out of a church formed in Southwark in London in 1616, with Henry Jacob, who had been a Puritan minister, as the pastor. These were Calvinistic Baptists. So... already differences. Gradually they spread. John Bunyan and William Kiffin became two of the well known leaders.

John Bunyan was the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Kiffin was a self-made man – who went from being a penniless apprentice to a wool trader and one of the wealthiest merchants in London (able to finance the King’s projects). Kiffin was a Member of Parliament for two years. He opposed ‘open membership’ or ‘open communion’ in Baptist churches, insisting on believer’s baptism as essential for taking communion. Bunyan supported open membership. So... further differences.

Perhaps the most famous debate between Baptists and the Church of England was when William Kiffin and others debated with a Church of England minister, Daniel Featley, who published his side of the argument as *The Dippers Dipt, or the Anabaptists Duck’d and Plunge’d over Head and Eares*. He accused Baptists of child abuse by refusing to baptise infants. These debates publicized Baptists. They grew steadily across the countries of the Isles.

A further very important theme is evangelism

The main story of Baptists across Europe now moves to Germany in the nineteenth century. Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800-1884) has often been referred to as the European Baptist ‘pioneer’ and as the ‘father’ of continental Baptists. The shaping of German Baptist churches, and also the promotion of pan-European Baptist mission owes an enormous amount to Oncken.

Oncken was brought up in the Lutheran Church. In 1813, at age 13, he came under new and dynamic spiritual influences. A Scottish merchant, John Walker Anderson, whom Oncken’s father knew, took the boy to Scotland to start him on his working life and to ‘make a man of him’. Oncken was to be away from Germany, in Scotland and England, for nine years.

Oncken moved from Edinburgh to London and it was at a London Methodist chapel that he heard a sermon on Romans chapter 8 that brought him to complete surrender to Christ. Oncken immediately began to give out evangelistic tracts and he used much of his spare money - and money he saved by frugal eating - to buy Bibles, which he also gave away. Evangelism was a priority.

In 1823 Johann Oncken was accepted by the Scottish-based, interdenominational Continental Society as a missionary to Germany. They recognised Oncken’s remarkable potential as an evangelist. Oncken’s life’s work was to be based in the city of Hamburg. He later married Sarah Mann, from London.

Oncken's preaching attracted many people and there was also considerable opposition from the city authorities. In this period he began to think about baptism: 'In a shoemaker's work shop in 1829, those whose hearts were separated from the state church, gathered themselves to study the holy writings, particularly the book of Acts which, alone, is the infallible church history. Here we soon recognised that the church of Christ can only be composed of converted persons who have made a confession of their faith in His death by being baptized; and the desire moved us all to follow this recognized truth, but we had to wait five years.'

After a long wait, on 22 April 1834, Johann Oncken and six others, one of whom was his wife, were baptised by an American, Barnas Sears, in the River Elbe. Oncken's diary describes how 'with joyful heart I stepped into the flood and with praising lips came out of it again onto the land.' On the next day the American visitor completed a historic task formally constituting in Hamburg the first German Baptist church, with Oncken as its pastor. Further baptisms took place, usually in the river Elbe.

Along with evangelism is the sixth theme - social action

An important turning point occurred when the growing congregation had a new building. (8b) There was a massive fire in Hamburg and Oncken immediately offered the Baptist meeting place to the authorities for accommodating the homeless. 80 people found food and shelter for eight months. The authorities, who had been persecuting the Baptists, became much more favourable. Rapid growth was experienced following this large-scale social ministry. In the following two years the numbers baptised were 322 and 380. During the reconstruction of Hamburg, people came from many other places in Europe to work. This created a missionary opportunity which the church was quick to grasp. Over 15 years three-quarters of the men baptised in Hamburg were travelling workers. Those who were converted and returned to their home cities often became missionaries.

When a bigger church building was built, C.H. Spurgeon came to preach. Spurgeon and Oncken had met in London. Oncken had requested the interview. Spurgeon had at first sent a terse message in reply: 'Tell Mr. Oncken, I have no time for chats. If the angel Gabriel should call and wanted a chat, I should say to him, "Most willingly, dear Gabriel, but it must be on the other side of Jordan".' It took more than this rebuff to put off a man like Oncken. Spurgeon relented and the two shared the New Park Street Chapel pulpit in London. They shared a commitment to evangelism and social action. Later, at a baptismal service in Hamburg, Spurgeon was deeply impressed by the way Oncken asked each candidate: 'What are you willing to do for Christ?' One of Oncken's most frequently quoted statements was that 'we consider every member a missionary' (leading to the well-known motto *Jeder Baptist ein Missionar*).

German Baptist life was linked with the emergence and growth of Baptist communities in many other countries.

Attracting gifted leaders is a seventh theme

In the Netherlands, for example, a Reformed Church minister, Johannes Feisser, was removed from ministry in 1843 when he began to make known his sympathy for believer's baptism. The news of this reached the Hamburg Baptist Church, where it created great interest,

and Julius Köbner, a close colleague of Oncken's, travelled to meet Feisser. Köbner baptized Feisser in May 1845, in the open air (in a ditch). Feisser wrote: 'It seemed to us, as if we had entered through the right gate, of which Bunyan speaks in his Pilgrim's Progress'.

Baptist life spread from Germany to the Nordic countries, first to Denmark, where Köbner was influential. The Baptists grew despite intense persecution. The first Swedish Baptist minister was Frederick Olaus Nilsson, who was baptised by Johann Oncken in 1847. Nilsson was a seaman, who had experienced evangelical conversion in New York. Nilsson baptised Anders Wiberg, a former Lutheran pastor, who became a powerful leader in Scandinavia – the equivalent of Oncken. Baptist work emerged in Norway and Sweden.

Other countries adjoining Germany in which a Baptist presence was established included Switzerland, Poland and the Czech lands. In Poland a schoolteacher, Gottfried Alf, from a Lutheran background, was the founder of Baptist work. In 1853 he experienced an evangelical conversion and his subsequent teaching and preaching stimulated revival. Alf heard of Baptists, and called a public discussion on baptism – was it for infants or only for believers? As a result, on a Sunday in 1858 nine people were baptised. Alf trained in Hamburg – as did many leaders. Throughout much of the 1860s the authorities attempted to suppress Alf's witness through assaults, interrogations, numerous imprisonments (some life-threatening) and large fines. Alf was another very significant and gifted leader.

Various parts of Central Europe were affected by Baptist mission. The most significant pioneer of Czech Baptist life was Henry Novotný. He had studied in Edinburgh, at the Free Church College, and his later work as a Baptist pioneer was supported by Scottish Baptists. Novotný built a chapel in his own garden. Against a background of persecution, as in Poland, Baptist life made progress. During its first ten years the Prague congregation grew to 180 members, with ten linked mission stations.

An important move was into Hungary and Austria

Here we have an eighth theme - the crossing of borders in mission

Hungarian Baptist work took root through the ministry of Heinrich Meyer, a forceful German missionary encouraged by Oncken with support from the British and Foreign Bible Society. Many early Baptists were colporteurs – selling Bibles and Christian literature – with the Bible Society. Mihaly Kornya and Mihaly Toth became fellow workers with Meyer and church planters. They became known as the 'peasant prophets' of the Hungarian-Romanian Baptist mission.

Kornya became the leading evangelist. He may have baptized over 10,000 people. Meyer also baptised many. At one baptism a woman who was very ill wanted to be baptised. Meyer wrote that at 3.00 am the Baptist group went to a place where there was water. The woman who was ill was transported in a cart, and a hole was cut in the ice that covered the water – this was in the depths of winter. Remarkably, the woman who was ill was healed and was able to walk home.

On one occasion, in 1890, Kornya was arrested and locked up in a building with a fierce bull. Kornya found an area where the bull could not reach him and then managed to make friends with the bull. In the morning people were amazed to see what some took to be a divine sign – Kornya with the bull's head on his lap!

The needs of mission in Bulgaria were brought to the attention of Baptists in the West through an article, 'The Macedonian Cry Re-Echoed from Macedonia Itself', which appeared in German Baptist publications in 1880. This was from a group in Kazanluk that had heard the gospel through Congregationalists from Armenia.

Although the group in Kazanluk did not know it when they made their appeal, help was already on its way. This was in the form of one of the shapers of Russian Baptist life, Ivan Kargel. Kargel had served the German Baptist congregation in St Petersburg and decided to move to Bulgaria. He arrived and baptised fourteen people - ten were Bulgarian, two Jewish and two German. Baptist life then spread.

Across in Romania, Baptist witness was established initially through German Baptists moving there. Among those who found employment in Bucharest was Karl Scharschmidt, together with his wife, Augusta. Scharschmidt, a carpenter, had been baptised by Oncken in Hamburg. Vasilii Pavlov from Georgia, a major leader, later worked in Romania. Baptists in the huge Russian Empire originated in different areas and under various influences. Vasilii Pavlov from Georgia was a powerful figure. Tbilisi, Georgia, Pavlov's home church, sent Pavlov to study with Oncken at Hamburg, and upon his return (after a year of training), he evangelised widely. He took a great interest in continental Baptist life.

In Albania the first baptism of a believer took place in 1937. Baptist work re-started in Albania after communism in 1992.

In the 1860s a small Baptist congregation emerged in Sarajevo, Bosnia, the first in the former Yugoslavia. Some of those attending were teachers who worked in a Christian school and in an orphanage run by a lady from England. In Croatia, Baptist witness emerged in a number of places, and in Vojvodina, in today's Serbia, Baptists were encouraged by Heinrich Meyer.

A varied people is a ninth theme

An amazing evangelical movement started in St Petersburg. Lord Radstock from England spoke about the evangelical faith to several members of the Russian aristocracy who were in Paris. Radstock spoke fluent French. This led to Radstock visiting St Petersburg several times in the 1870s. The effect was extraordinary. Through his preaching several wealthy and influential figures became evangelicals - Count Aleksey Bobrinskiy, at one time Russian Minister of Transportation, Count Korff and his wife, Princess Natalia Lieven and other members of her family, and Colonel Vasilii Pashkov, a former soldier of the Royal Guard, and his wife. A mansion owned by Pashkov on the Neva in St Petersburg - he had several large estates and owned a number of mines - became an important meeting place. Pashkov and others began to print and distribute tracts, and to organise philanthropic efforts. Their ministry on behalf of the poor included hospital and prison visiting, helping unemployed people to find work, and setting up a shelter for homeless children. The movement eventually merged with Baptists. There is great social variation.

Baptists and the Bible - a key theme all the way through

Baptists in Russia, as elsewhere, spread as people read the Bible for themselves. Colporteurs, especially selling Bibles, were important across the Empire, in Russia and Ukraine, after a Russian language Bible was produced. British and Foreign Bible Society. St Petersburg was a centre for much evangelical life. But there was also persecution. In 1873 Edward Steane, a leading English Baptist, spoke about 'acts of cruel persecution of Baptist Christians in the Ukraine'.

Baptists spread in all the countries that became the USSR. To the south of Georgia, Armenia has a remarkable Christian tradition tracing back to the early centuries of the Christian Church. In the 1880s Baptist preachers came to Armenia from Tbilisi, which had a significant Armenian community. A Baptist congregation was formed. Baptist work in Armenia almost disappeared under Stalin's purges. Recently this Baptist Union has shown great vitality.

Key churches - number eleven

Baptist beginnings in the Baltic countries have a significant place within early Baptist life in mainland Europe. In 1841 the Memel (Klaipeda) Baptist church was established: reckoned to be the first Baptist church in East Prussia. (21b)

One of the first Baptist members in Memel was Joseph Hague, whose father was a Baptist pastor in England. In 1841 Oncken travelled there and baptised a total of twenty-five people. He wrote in his diary about a dramatic, night-time baptism on the first night, when sixteen were baptised:

...quickly afterwards we got to the river, about 4 km from the town. Because one of the baptismal candidates was lame, [she] had to be carried the bigger part of the way, that is why only between 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning was I able to accomplish the holy act. The weather was very auspicious, the moon was smiling, no leaf moved, and everything around us was solemn and peaceful. ...Now everyone was ready to step into the water, and after we had prayed for God's presence and the blessing of the Lord, in whose name the holy act [was] to be accomplished, the dear converts were buried together with Christ in His death by immersion. After everyone changed clothes, we knelt down and offered these followers to the Great Shepherd of Israel, asking for guidance and protection over them. At 4 o'clock in the morning I could take rest, tired yet with thanksgiving to God for His defence....

Memel grew until it had the largest membership of any Baptist church in Europe outside England. In 1875 it had 2,780 church members - at the mother church and at twenty-seven mission stations, the greatest number of the smaller groups meeting in what today is Latvia.

And interdependence of churches – number twelve

Memel was crucial for mission in Latvia.

Further north, Estonian Baptist churches emerged from local revival movements.

As an example of wider continental mission, one person from Memel, Martin Kalweit, who travelled for his work, contributed to Baptist beginnings in Russia.

Here is mission from Estonia

Latin Europe.... in France a Bible study group in Northern France, meeting after the Napoleonic war, found that their studies raised the issue of believer's baptism.

French and then Belgian Baptist work grew, for example through tent missions, and one pastor who became well known in the evangelical world beyond France was Ruben Saillens, ministering in Paris. Madeleine Blocher Saillens became the first female Baptist pastor in France.

In Italy, two British Baptist ministers, James Wall and Edward Clarke, were important. Also Kemme Landels, a Scotsman, who had been in business in Sicily, moved to Naples. N. H. Shaw, from Dewsbury, went to Italy in 1878 with the British General Baptist Missionary Society (GBMS) and served in Florence. The GBMS work received considerable support from Thomas Cook, in England, who arranged mission support tour 'packages', which included classical and Christian tourism.

In Spain, in 1870, an American, William Knapp, baptised over people and formed them into the first Baptist church in the country. But more intense repression after the Civil War meant that no baptisms were reported, and Knapp became discouraged. In 1876 he was appointed Professor of Modern Languages at Yale.

Bibles and Gospels were distributed on a large scale. There was severe censorship.

In Portugal, Joseph Charles Jones formed the first Baptist congregation, in 1888, in Oporto. Jones, who was of Welsh descent, had been born in Oporto, where his father was active in business and became very wealthy. Joseph Jones was baptised in London, by James Spurgeon (the brother of C.H. Spurgeon).

In 1908 the Brazilian Baptist Convention sent Zachary Taylor to Portugal to investigate the potential for mission work. Their vision was to make Portugal one of their fields of outreach. Taylor became a pastor. In 1912 the church led by Joseph Jones joined Taylor. A spacious building was completed - modelled on Spurgeon's Tabernacle and called the Baptist Tabernacle - for the congregation.

Baptist communities began to emerge in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Lebanon, from the end of the nineteenth century. A Lebanese photographer who went to the USA to assist with the Turkish exhibition at the Chicago World's Fair, experienced an evangelical conversion and was baptised in St. Louis, Missouri. He returned to Lebanon in 1893 and gathered friends and family for Bible study. Two years later a Baptist church began in Beirut. A seminary and school were established in the twentieth century.

Interdependence goes right across Europe and the Middle East – today.

Conclusion

Key themes

Baptism;
the church;
religious freedom;
debate;
evangelism;
social action;
gifted leaders;
crossing of borders;

**a varied people;
the role of the Bible;
churches and
interdependence**

These are the themes that have characterised our communities of conviction – and all are relevant today.