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REV. I. E. BILL,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth Peace, good will toward Men."

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## REV. J. G. ONCKEN.

The time will come when the name of Oncken will be uttered in the same breath with those of Luther and Calvin. His name will be as necessary to complete the catalogue of German Reformers, as his work is necessary to the completion of the Reformation. Fitted by the grace of God, and guided by His providence along "a way he knew not," he has been led to a position of immeasurable influence, and at greater personal sacrifice and suffering than his predecessors endured, has laid the foundations of a more scriptural and thorough Reformation than they attempted. Taking the Apostles for his pattern and their instructions for his guidance, without waiting for the approval or permission of civil authorities, and even in defiance of their decrees, he has organized the churches of the disciples, according to the only principles of polity recognized in the New Testament, upon an independent, voluntary and self-sustaining foundation. Every other method has proved a failure. The embrace of the state has suffocated every church that has endured it. Oncken has started with the fundamental principle, that the interior spiritual life of individual Christians is the only reliable basis for the organization and perpetuity of pure and efficient Christian churches. This grand principle lies back of all controversies about ordinances. The essential difference between Baptists and all other Christian sects, is not in the manner of the administration of a rite, nor even in the character and qualifications of the subjects of scriptural ordinances; it is rather involved in these questions:—Is the church of Christ to be perpetuated in the earth through spiritual influences, or by hereditary descent? by a polity that keeps it separate from the world, or by a polity that renders the aid of unregenerate communities necessary to its existence? Standing upon the platform, that a gospel church can properly be composed of such persons only as have practically received the gospel by faith, been justified by the righteousness of Christ, and voluntarily confederated together to observe His laws, aid each other and promote His glory. Oncken has repudiated the authority of the state, renounced its aid, and even braved its hostility. He has expunged the dogma of infant membership—that ingenious scheme for enlarging the church by bringing the world into its communion—which, necessarily, by its own legitimate workings, undermines the spirituality of the church that adopts it, and gradually but surely obliterates its essential primitive characteristics. In a word, he depends upon nothing in building up the churches of Christ but the grace of the Holy Spirit operating upon individual hearts, and thus fitting them for holy fellowship and for efficient, loving and voluntary labor. That these were the principles upon which the primitive churches were constituted, is clear to every candid mind familiar with the "Acts of the Apostles." The history of the world proves that this method of church extension, devised by our Lord and practised by inspired Apostles, is the best and most efficient for attaining the ends proposed to be secured through the agency of Christ's churches.

The Rev. J. G. Oncken has been honoured by God as the prominent agent in commencing this Evangelical Reformation in Germany, and we have therefore deemed that a brief sketch of his life and labours would prove interesting and instructive to our readers.

John Gerhard Oncken was born of humble parentage in Varel, a small town in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, January 26th, 1800. He was religiously educated in the Lutheran church, and was a Christian according to its mode of making Christians in that land. That is, he was sprinkled in infancy, catechi-

zed, confirmed, in due time admitted to the Lord's supper, and enrolled as a full member of the church. His Pastor at his confirmation advised him to record in a journal, every day the deeds he had done;—to be sure and record the good on the credit side, and the bad on the debtor side, and then at the close of the week to cast up accounts, and he would come out very well. "Alas" said he, "I soon found the debtor side was filled, and nothing recorded on the credit side. So I closed the book and gave up keeping an account."

During a visit to Great Britain in his early manhood, he says:—

"I heard the gospel faithfully preached, for the first time in my life. It led me to study for myself, the revealed will of Christ. I gave myself to him, and resolved to carry the truth back to Germany."

Immediately upon his conversion he commenced those personal evangelical labours, which, wherever pursued prove so successful in winning souls to Christ. Before leaving England his first convert—a poor mulatto lad—was won to Christ. He says—

"When I discoursed with this boy on the love of Christ to us poor sinners, his large beautiful eyes moistened and the tears freely flowed. We knelt together in prayer and supplicated for mercy. God answered our prayers. He became a Christian."

He returned to Germany to labour for the evangelizing of his countrymen, and for several years was Missionary of the Continental Society and agent of the Edinburgh Bible Society.

For several years the mind of Mr. Oncken was much exercised in relation to the subjects of baptism and the true principles of church organization. Without any acquaintance with Baptists, and without having ever read any of their controversial writings, from the simple statements of the New Testament he was convinced, against all his educational prejudices, associations and interests, that baptism was immersion, and that believers alone were the proper subjects of that ordinance. In this state of mind he wrote to the late Robert Haldane, of Edinburgh, requesting him to come or send some one to baptize him and his associates. Mr. Haldane advised self-baptism, after the manner of Roger Williams and his brethren—but "this advice" says Mr. Oncken "we could not follow, since we had resolved to take the word of God as our only guide in religion, and we found no self-baptism in the Bible."

The Rev. Barnas Sears, D.D., in 1833-4 visited Europe, and was requested by the executive Board of the "Triennial Baptist Convention," "to make enquiries in Germany respecting the religious state and wants of the country." Through Rev. Dr. Cone, he had heard of Mr. Oncken, and in a letter to the Board written from Germany, Dr. Sears says, "On my arrival in Hamburg I called on Mr. Oncken, whom I found to be in all respects an interesting man. He is a German, a little more than 30 years of age, married in England, has two children, is perfectly master of the English language, and though not a man of liberal education, has a very strong acute mind, is a man of much practical knowledge, and is very winning in his personal appearance and manners. From 1823 to 1828 he was a Missionary of the Continental Society, and preached in Hamburg and vicinity with very considerable success. Since that time he has been agent of the Edinburgh Bible Society, and has more influence than any other man in selecting the publications of the Lower Saxony Tract Society. He has the confidence of Tholuck, Hahn, Hengetenberg and many other individuals of the Evangelical party, and has their co-operation in circulating Bibles and Tracts. He has at length become so thoroughly a Baptist that he cannot

be satisfied without being a member of a Baptist church, and the second day after my arrival he requested me to baptize him."

This was the introduction of Mr. Oncken to the American Baptists. Dr. Sears, after his first visit to Hamburg, passed over to England, and on his return a few months after, Mr. Oncken, with six others, were prepared for the ordinance of Baptism. At 9 o'clock at night, on the 22d of April, 1834, to avoid the notice and interference of the police—fit guardians of the purity and prerogatives of the established church—the little party embarking in a small boat, sailed to a small island toward the south shore of the Elbe, opposite the harbor of Hamburg. Here hidden from the eyes of their enemies, by the light of the same stars that smiled serenely upon the night of the Redeemer's birth, it was the blessed privilege of Dr. Sears to perform the great act of his life to "bury with Christ in baptism" this little band of disciples, and thus unostentatiously to inaugurate the new Reformation in Germany. As Mr. Oncken, like his Lord and Saviour, "came up out of the water," he exclaimed in the fullness of a pious heart, and as if anticipating some of the results of that hour's consecration, "Bless the Lord! O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name!" As when Christ was born, so now, the inhabitants of the city slept, as the unnoticed company came peacefully within the walls, and knew not that salvation had come unto them.

Upon the next day, in Mr. Oncken's "own hired house," the first church of baptized believers was formally organized, in the city of Hamburg.

For a time the church had rest. Through the influence of one of the Senators—an evangelical man—they were permitted unmolested to meet for the worship of God. Their numbers increased and they were edified in Christ. But soon a formal appeal for the suppression of this new sect, was drawn up by the Lutheran Clergy, and presented to the authorities. They represented that Mr. Oncken was seducing the people from the orthodox faith as by law prescribed.

A single instance, from many, will illustrate the measures adopted for crushing the heresy.

"A young man who, like Luther, had felt for a long time a deep and melancholy interest for the salvation of his soul, but who was an entire stranger to the great consoling doctrine of the gospel, became acquainted with a Baptist. Astonished at the manner in which he spoke of his assurance of his acceptance with God—his smiles of gladness and inspiring hopes—he asked him how it was? The Christian gave him a reason for the hope that was within him. He asked him whom he heard preach? The Baptist told him Oncken. He determined on the following Wednesday to attend the meeting. The subject was justification by faith. He listened with interest. Light poured into his mind. He found peace with God. Soon he desired to be baptized. When this became known, an effort was made by his parents to prevent his uniting with the church. His kindred were called in. When they were all assembled in the house of his parents, he was brought in before them. They commenced with kindness. The stern farmers, who were called in from the country to the family council, wept as they entreated him to abandon his design. But his heart was fixed—he remained firm. Then they tried knottier weapons. Threats and imprecations were uttered; and, finally, the civil power was called into requisition. But, before this was resorted to, the schoolmaster was called in. Still though always tractable when a boy, he was unmoved in his purpose now. Then the pastor, who had confirmed and absolved him, was sent for; and, having, on entering the room, been requested

to be seated, the young man handed him a New Testament, saying, 'Sir, I have no predilections in favor of the Baptists, and if you can show me from this book that the step which I propose taking is wrong, I shall remain where I am.'

The pastor, however, did not even open the New Testament, but sneered at the upstarts in those days, and spoke of the impertinence of children who thought themselves wiser than their teachers and parents. When the pastor had left, a younger brother, in whose presence the conversation had taken place, said:—"Brother, I do not understand much about these matters, but I am sure if a learned parson will not take the trouble to open the New Testament and convince you, the truth must be on your side, and whatever may be the consequence, I will stand by you."

Policemen were next sent for, and both the young men were escorted to jail. On their arrival, the whole Cæsar's band gathered around them, threatening them with the "Rye chest" (an old prison), on black bread and water, with all the horrors of a gloomy dungeon. But firm as a rock, the young men were not to be moved, and having done nothing worthy of stripes, they were merely threatened, and escorted back to their parents' home. Here they were confined by their parents for a fortnight, to prevent them from going among the Baptists. But alas! alas! they had already drunk in too deeply from the textbook of the sect every where spoken against—the word of God. Both in due time were baptized."

Soon after the organization of the church, Mr. Oncken was offered a commission as a Missionary of the Baptist Board of this country, which, in September, 1835, he accepted, and which relation has ever since continued. He did not confine his labors to the city of Hamburg, but aided by an assistant, Mr. C. F. Lange, he made frequent excursions into Bremen, Oldenburg and other districts in the north of Germany, preaching, distributing bibles and tracts, and soon baptizing converts to the faith. The membership of the church in Hamburg rapidly increased, and it has become pre-eminently among the churches of modern times, a working body of disciples, devoting themselves generally to voluntary and systematic labors for the spreading of the truth and the conversion of souls. Before three years had passed, churches had been organized in Oldenburg and Stuttgart—converts had been baptized at Marburg, Jever, and at other points, and the baptized disciples numbered about one hundred and fifty.

The Lutheran clergy became alarmed at the spreading of what they styled a pernicious heresy, and repeated applications were made to the civil authorities to prevent the labors of these missionaries. The Senate of Hamburg summoned Mr. Oncken and several of the members of the church before them, and after remonstrances and threats, in April, 1839, issued a decree, "informing said Oncken, and his associates, that the Senate neither acknowledges the society which he denominates the Baptist church, nor himself as its preacher; on the contrary, that the Senate can only view it as a criminal schism, of which he is the author." He was ordered to "refrain from all further exercise of his unauthorized and unrecognized ministerial functions, and his associates were commanded to cease all further participation in the same culpable and unlawful proceedings." Their reply to this prohibition was in substance the same as that made by the Apostle Peter to a similar command, when he was told by the authorities of the church, as by law established, that his functions were "unauthorized and unrecognized,"—"we ought to obey God rather than man"—and they persevered in preaching the Gospel and in labouring to glorify God by winning souls to the truth. Though the