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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL	1
BAPTIST PREACHING IN EARLY 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND . Raymond Brown	4
CONSERVATION IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT Paul H. Ballard	23
ANDREW GIFFORD ON HIS YOUTH Geoffrey F. Nuttall	39
IN THE STUDY Neville Clark	41
NOTES	
Printing Equipment	3
Baptist Union Library. Northern College Records	22
Recently Restored Chapels. Chapel Records	38
1689 Confession Commemoration	40

EDITORIAL

Last year provided a wealth of anniversaries in church history to be observed, especially by Baptists. We shall presently in this journal be able to draw upon the fruits of certain of those commemorations, notably the C. H. Spurgeon ter-jubilee. But before 1984 slips completely from view we should reflect upon one other event which was observed by the wider Baptist community, because it raises an important point concerning Baptist historiography now and in the future.

It was late on an April evening in 1834 that a small group of Germans received believers' baptism by immersion, in the Elbe just outside Hamburg, at the hands of Professor Barnard Sears, an American Baptist. The leader of this group was Johann Gerhard

Oncken, who had joined an Independent chapel during a stay in England, and had returned to his homeland to work as an evangelist and Bible-distributor. From this tiny, furtive beginning stemmed the German - and indeed much of the continental - Baptist movement. Furtive it had to be, for Oncken had already incurred the wrath of the city's civil and religious authorities for his apparently un-ecclesiastical activities. But by the time of Oncken's death in 1884 there were about 150 Baptist churches in Germany with over 31,000 members, not to mention churches in Denmark, Poland, Russia, Roumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Switzerland and Holland. Oncken was not just the pioneer of this movement. For fifty years he was its leader and its direct inspiration, through his preaching, teaching and Bible-work all over Europe. To continental Baptists he is therefore a father-figure in a way that no single figure, be it Helwys or Carey or Spurgeon, can be to us. Oncken and his early followers met opposition and persecution, including imprisonment. That such hostility was engendered by the State Church as much as by the secular authorities created an even wider gulf of enmity and suspicion than between Baptists and the establishment in nineteenth century Britain, and it lasted much longer into this century. It is clear, for instance, that the distinctly cool attitude of German Baptists to the sufferings of the Confessing Church during the Third Reich, owed not a little to the memory of those persecutions. Why should the heirs of those who had treated Oncken and his friends so contemptibly, now be the object of so much sympathy and admiration from Christians abroad, when they had simply broken laws to which as a State Church they were bound?

Oncken's remarkable achievements - and of course the Baptist movement continued to expand after his death - have often been deservedly admired in this country, but as yet they have probably not been understood as fully as they need to be. Inevitably the English-language accounts and biographies of earlier years have tended to the brief or hagiographical, or both. The contemporary reader, sensitive to the interplay of theological and sociological factors in all religious developments, is keen to know much more. What kinds of people, socially, culturally and politically, became Baptists in mid-nineteenth century Germany? How did the rise of the Baptist movement relate to the debates about infant baptism which had been going on in the Lutheran churches since at least the time of Schleiermacher? How does the movement appear when set more firmly within the context of the nationalist and liberal movements of Germany in the last century, and the founding of the Prussian Empire? How was it that, despite their aversion to the state churches, German Baptists in fact came to be deeply coloured by heavily Lutheran attitudes to the authority of the state? And much more.

All this is another way of saying, by example, that there is a need for more concerted co-operation and exchange, on an international level among Baptist historians. We already benefit from a degree of active contact between Britain,

North America and some other parts of the English-speaking world. But the relationship with Europe remains relatively under-developed. Comparisons, contrasts and relationships between the life and thought of the churches in varying contexts, provide much of the spice of history. So what about a continental Baptist historical summer school one year?

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BETTER PRINTING

In our publications we are grateful to Mrs F. Bowers for all the effort of typing, and to Rank Xerox for reproduction etc., but we hear from time to time questions about the quality, especially about justification of the right-hand margin, which would make reading easier.

In faith we are purchasing a new machine which will enable us to improve the quality and to justify. We hope we can fund this without resorting to the interest-free loan we have been offered.

If members would like to send me donations towards this capital equipment, I shall be pleased to receive such, especially as we shall be holding our subscription rates for a fourth year running.

THORNTON ELWYN
Treasurer