

Baptist Churches in Switzerland in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Dr. Rainer Ebeling¹

1. Introduction

Members of the Committee of Baptist Heritage and Identity of the BWA,

it is a privilege for me to present to you an overview of the history of the Swiss Baptist Union.

1.1 Reminders of Anabaptist 500th anniversary in 2025

Last year Christianity celebrated 500 years jubilee of Reformation. In 7 years, we as Baptists could celebrate together with at least the Mennonites 500 years radical reformation of the Anabaptists. They had their first Baptism on January 21. in Zürich in a private home, on April 9th in St. Gallen with 500 persons being baptized in a river and on Easter Sunday April 16th, there was a baptism of numerous citizens of Waldshut, Germany in the river Rhine.

These are our roots. And without them, there would be no Baptist Church anywhere. Now let us turn to the history of Baptist churches in Switzerland.

1.2 Demarcations and Limitations

Due to the limited time, I will concentrate with first priority on the beginnings in the middle of the 19th century, and then present two highlights of the 20th century, namely the separation from the German Baptist Union in the 1920s and the situation of the Union in the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s.

A further demarcation is the fact, that this presentation does not take notice of Baptist churches in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. There are 9 churches, 6 of them belong to the "Association des Eglises Evangélique Baptistes" which are not members of the BWA. There are very casual contacts between the Swiss Baptist Union and those churches – but they are not on an official level.²

One limitation has to be added: There are only three documents dealing with the history of the Swiss Baptist Union:

- a BD-Treatise of Theo Bächtold; 1970, IBTS, Rüsclikon
- a "Geschichte des Baptismus in der Schweiz; 1978, by Kaspar Schneiter, pastor of Baptist churches in Switzerland;

¹ Rainer Ebeling. is a graduate of the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüsclikon of 1973 (Bachelor of Divinity). He served in Baptist churches as well as in Swiss reformed churches as pastor for 30 years. 1995 he received his DTh in systematic theology at the University of Zürich with a dissertation on free-church influences in the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Since 2004 teaching Systematic Theology on different levels in churches, Bibel colleges and seminaries in Eastern Europe. Presently still affiliated with an independend evanlegical seminary inSwitzerland, guest lecturer at the Theological Faculty Matija Vlacic Illiric in Zagreb and research fellow in the department of Systematic Theology, UNISA, Pretoria

² Cf the respective sections in L. Nittnaus: Baptisten in der Schweiz

- Baptisten in der Schweiz by Lothar Nittnaus, 2008

All three do not really meet academic standards. The greatest disadvantage of all is, that they did not consult sources outside the Baptist denomination; for instance no one tried to investigate whether or not anything could be found in family archives of persons mentioned in primary sources – such as the diary of J.G. Oncken.

After these necessary remarks, I would like to come to my first main chapter:

1.3 Social situation in Switzerland in the 2nd half of the 19th century

In the middle of the 19th century, the last military conflict – the Sonderbundskrieg – was just ended, and this war was a confessional war between the catholic cantons and the protestant ones. After the end of the war the liberal Swiss confederation was formed. Due to this circumstance Switzerland was a refuge for persons who participated in revolutions in different german states. Many of them were academics and artists – so for instance the composer Richard Wagner. Being a liberal democracy in the middle of Europe, which experienced just a period of monarchial restoration, counts as one of her successes to constitutional freedom of religion.

I would also like to mention three novellists to complete the picture of Switzerland in the middle of the 19th century:

Jeremias Gotthelf (1797 – 1854): He is the oldest. Pastor in a Swiss reformed parish in the Kanton of Bern. He is in deep opposition against the political radicals (liberals). He accuses the moral decay going along with liberal philosophy. Perhaps you know his novel: The Black Spider.

Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825 -1898): The periods of the Renaissance and Counter Reformation furnished the subjects for most of his novels. Most of his plots spring from the deeper conflict between freedom and fate and culminate in a dramatic crisis in which the hero, in the face of a great temptation, loses his moral freedom and is forced to fulfill the higher law of destiny. Behind this is also the religious struggle of predestination and free will. Meyer does not oppose the political and societal situation in Switzerland, he is not opposing secularism and liberalism, but he wants to raise some critical questions in the form of his historical novels

Gottfried Keller (1819 – 1890): He was a convinced liberal. Participated in the conflict between the liberal protestant cantons with the catholic cantons as partisan. In our understanding of today he was bourgeois. But if we put Gotthelf on the right side – Keller definitely is on the left. Keller became one of the most popular narrators of literary realism in the late 19th century. - The milieu is always that of an orderly bourgeois existence, within which the most manifold human destinies, the most humorous relations are progressing, the most peculiar and hardy types of endurance and reticence being formed. Some of the stories contained a note that was new in German literature and that endeared them particularly to Germans as embodying an ideal as yet unrealized in their own country: they narrate the development of character under the relatively free conditions of little Switzerland, picturing an unbureaucratic civic life and an independence of business initiative that cannot but

attract those who are denied these privileges. For us today Keller depicted an orderly, neat whole world at his time this world attracted the revolutionaries from the German states.

1.4 Ecclesiastical situation

In this societal context, we will take notice of the ecclesiastical situation.

1.4.1 In General

While the Catholic church seems to be restricted to the old cantons and their political influence after the lost war was pretty limited, the situation on the Protestant side is pretty colorful.

The majority seems to be influenced by rationalistic and liberal theology. There were complaints about the dry rationalism. There was a vehement opposition when the German refugee and liberal theologian Strauss was elected at the theological faculty in Zürich.

There was also a broad stream of people influenced by pietism. If we take them into focus, we have to mention three women:

Meta Heusser (1797 – 1876) – mother of Johanna Spyri, author of the “Heidi” novel. She appealed time and again at the church government in Zürich in spiritual matters. She participated at least in one salon in Zürich, that of Elizabeth Meyer (mother of the above mentioned novelist). In these salons and circles religious questions were discussed. Heusser also was a poet and the hymnal of the reformed churches in Switzerland contains still one of her songs.

Anna Schlatter (1773 – 1826) in the city of St. Gallen had great influence on the spiritual life of the city. She entertained a wide ranging correspondence. Her grandson was the respected theologian Adolf Schlatter. One of her sons was the founder of the free evangelical churches in Switzerland.

And finally you will be confronted again and again with the name of Juliane von Krüdener (1764 – 1834). She was not Swiss but Estonian. As wife of a diplomat, she travelled a lot. She had public evangelistic rallies in the different places in Switzerland; entertained in numerous salons; played a role in the revival in Geneva. Although the literature about her is controversial, she had an impact on the pietistic scene in Switzerland. She had contact with the two other ladies via correspondence.

1.4.2 Free-churches

In this context in the middle of the 19th century we have the rise of free-churches in Switzerland. People, who were dissatisfied with the situation within the reformed church, formed house circles. Soon some of these groups formed their own congregations within the reformed church, others separated themselves from the state-church.

1.4.2.1 Mennonites

Of course there is one exception: the Mennonites. They are direct descendants of the Anabaptists of reformation time. They survived in some villages in the Emmental, canton Bern and on the heights of the Jura-mountain range above 1000 meters.

1.4.2.2 Free evangelical – von Roth and Schlatter

Karl Samuel Adolf von Rodt (* 25. Oktober 1805 in Bern; † 26. Mai 1861 in Bern) was the founder of the free-evangelical church in Bern

He was a son of an old bernese family. Out of protest against the liberalism and rationalism within the state-church, he joined the revival of the french-speaking part of Switzerland; when he was banned from Bern he went to Geneva, where he was ordained as minister in an independent church. He returned to Bern when the constitution guaranteed religious freedom. In the region of the canton Bern he formed several Christian churches, which he named free-evangelical churches, indicating the separation from the state. Besides this engagement he had numerous contacts to free-church leaders and movements all over Europe.

In the north-eastern part of Switzerland, we have another person, who independent of Roth founded free-evangelical churches: Gottfried Schlatter (1809-1877), descendant from the above-mentioned Anna Schlatter.

1.4.2.3 New Anabaptists (Evangelisch-Taufgesinnte)

Finally we have to mention the Evangelisch Taufgesinnten Gemeinden (ETG). This denomination is known in the USA under the name "Apostolic Christian Church". However, this name has no link to our subject, therefore when dealing with this period of church-history, members of the ETG prefer to speak of "New Anabaptists".

The founder was Samuel Heinrich Froehlich (1803–1857). Froehlich, a young seminary student in Switzerland, experienced a dramatic conversion, causing him to come into conflict with the state-church. He was excommunicated in the aftermath of his refusal to submit to an order that required the Heidelberg Catechism to be replaced by a new rationalistic catechism. He had sympathies with the Mennonite faith, but soon became convinced they were in a lukewarm state. Some of the Reformed and Mennonite dissenters followed Fröhlich and were soon known as "Neu-Täufer" (New Anabaptists).

During this time he became affiliated with Baptist, Mennonite and Anabaptist workers. He was re-baptized in February, 1832, as an adult. Through preaching in private meetings, new churches were planted. The work continued and in thirty-five years an estimated 110 congregations were established.

Froehlich was deeply influenced by the Anabaptists (who were known as the radical reformers in sixteenth century Europe). He embraced the following Anabaptist teachings:

Sola Scriptura - Scripture alone is the sole rule of faith and practical living.

Separation of Church and State

Believers' Baptism - adult baptism as opposed to infant baptism. The rebirth by baptism

Holiness of Life

Nonviolence - Opposed going to war in the name of Christianity.

Fröhlich founded churches in his home canton Aargau and in the north-eastern part of Switzerland.

Conclusion: In the middle of the 19th century we have pietistic groups within the state-church, we have some movements who today are independent churches who at this time worked within the state-church, we have dissenters forming their own denominations like the free-evangelical churches and the New-Anabaptists. And of course we must not forget the Mennonites.

This is the scene when we start with Baptists in Switzerland.

2. Oncken in Switzerland

Johann Gerhard Oncken (26 January 1800 - 2 January 1884) was a pioneer German Baptist preacher, variously referred to as the "Father of Continental Baptists", the "Father of German Baptists" and the "Apostle of European Baptists". J. G. Oncken helped direct and guide the growth of Baptists throughout Germany and across much of Europe for half a century.

In 1847 he travelled from Hamburg to southern Germany and Switzerland. Oncken did not come as an evangelist or missionary. He was agent of several Bible and Tract societies. As such he visited Switzerland. October 7th 1847 he arrived in Basel and he left Switzerland via Konstanz Nov 1st. The Oncken-archive in Elstal, Germany has a hand written diary of Oncken's in English. So we know first hand about his travel route and whom he met. He preached in different independent churches and gave also some Bible-instructions.

2.1 *His Diary*

From the diary we learn the following: In Basel Oncken had contact with members of the Bernoulli-family³ and with the seminary in Chrischona. Then he went to Bern, where he met v. Rodt. Preached in his churches. He also had a meeting with Mennonites and a first contact with the New Anabaptists. From Bern he went to Zürich, where he mostly conferred with people of the state church and some members of the high-council of Zürich. He stayed in the house of Leonhardt Schulthess, who was a member of the High Council of Zürich and banqueter by profession,

From Zürich Oncken went to the east. In Wattwil, St. Gallen he met a certain Jakob Grob. This man first was befriended with Fröhlich. But they had a dispute about the question of sanctification. Eventually Grob came to Stuttgart, and was baptized in the Baptist church. Back home in Wattwil he had a small congregation in his house. Oncken knew about him. So

³ The Bernoulli-family belongs to the very old nobility of Basel. Members of the family were high-ranking academics in different fields of science, as well natural-sciences and humanities.

The person mentioned is Nikolaus Bernoulli – not the mathematician – he lived more than a hundred years earlier. Nikolaus Bernoulli was lawyer and president of the criminal high court of Basel. A biography of him tells, that he was connected to pietistic circles in Basel. This fits with what Oncken is telling in his diary.

he visited him. As the result of this visit, Oncken made this congregation in Wattwil the first Baptist church in Switzerland. From Wattwil Oncken travelled northbound meeting Schlatter in St. Gallen and in Hauptwil – close to St. Gallen he stayed with the New-Anabaptist congregation there. This church was founded by Fröhlich. One of the leading persons there (Brunschweiler, owner of textile industrial plants) relative to Fröhlich, later joined the free-evangelicals.

2.2 Evaluation

What is the result of this journey? What are the basic insights?

Oncken had a number of contacts as agent of bible societies. He was very interested in visiting pietistic groups. He tried to convince them of his Baptist conviction and invited them to join his Union.

Oncken disagreed with the Mennonites. He thought they baptized their children between age 14 and 16 without really asking for a conversion experience. Furthermore he did not share their pacifism and their refusal to give an oath. Oncken disagreed with the New - Anabaptist concerning the way of baptism (objecting against sprinkling) and also concerning military-service and oath.⁴ And, Oncken disagreed with the free-evangelical churches concerning their openness towards infant-baptism (having a dual practice of both forms of baptism). So, generally Oncken gathered those who dissented from the dissenters. This was the beginning of Baptist churches in Switzerland.

3. Swiss Baptist until 1925

3.1 *Swiss Baptists as part of the Southern German convention*

Until the beginning of World War 1 several local Baptist congregations were established; in Basel, the area of Bern, Zürich as the biggest, and the area of St. Gallen Appenzell. Their numbers grew from 12 to about 1000. These Baptist churches were part of the Southern German Baptist Convention, which included Baptist churches in Southern Germany, the Alsace and Switzerland.⁵

Oncken sent some of his travelling co-workers also on visitation to Switzerland. At least from one (Cramme) we have also a diary. Here he reports, that the swiss Baptist churches need guidance and a permanent mission worker. But we do not find any traces of a church-planting strategy. All new Baptist churches consisted of members and groups, who separated from other free-churches. So I guess, that already at the beginning the corporate Baptist identity was very weak. Unfortunately the reports of the Southern German Baptist Convention are only giving statistics. We do not know about any theological issues being discussed.

⁴ See H. Luckey: Lehmann, p 132ff: During an audience with the Prussian king, the king asked Oncken, why he did not join the Mennonites and all his problems with being tolerated would be solved. In his answer Oncken marked the above mentioned items.

⁵ The German title is: Oberrheinische Vereinigung

The convention had their meetings alternately in Stuttgart and Zürich. Therefore we can conclude that there were no tensions between the two nationalities.

At this time also some Baptist churches were founded in the French speaking part of the country. And in the area of Bern, i.e. where the two language groups meet, there were some mutual contacts.

3.2 Separation from Germany at the end of WW I

World War I set an end to the close link between the southern German Baptist churches and the Swiss Baptist churches. The Alsace was given to France, and the churches there joined the AEEB, so did the French-speaking Baptist churches in Switzerland.

In 1923 the delegates of the Swiss Baptist churches at the Southern German Baptist Convention moved, that the convention be dissolved. At the same time they organized themselves as Swiss Baptist Union. In a letter to the administrative board of the German Baptist Union, the Swiss informed them, that they separated from the German Union and constituted their own. But they wanted to have good relations as members of an extended union. This was accepted until the beginning of World War II. The Swiss Baptists installed a motherhouse for diaconesses for social work, and they had their own monthly magazine.

In all reports the reason for separation are matters of monetary transfer, when Germany encountered a severe inflation in the early 1920s. There is the opinion, that this is not really the true reason. But we depend on speculation. Reasons might have been:

- Germany was officially the loser of World War I.
- The supreme authority and independence given to the local church, was and is among Swiss Baptist of ultra high esteem. This stood against a rather strong union, with quite some central authority in Germany.
- A lack of Baptist identity. I believe that some of the Baptist churches defined themselves too much in demarcation to the New-Anabaptists and the free-evangelical churches.

4. After WW II

For the second half of the 20th century I would like to point out 4 different subjects, which relate to the perception of Swiss Baptists in Switzerland and beyond. For this period I have very limited sources. But I have studied in Switzerland and for eleven years I was pastor of the Baptist church in St. Gallen and member of the administrative board of the Swiss Baptist Union.

4.1 The International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Rüslikon

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board opened in 1949 an International theological Seminary in Rüslikon, near Zürich⁶. The seminary soon had a good academic reputation and was befriended with the theological faculty of the University of Zürich. The seminary was never part of the Union, but had good relations with it. In the ecumenical and academic

⁶ For the history of the seminary see C. Woodfin: An experiment

world the professors of the seminary, especially those from Germany and Switzerland were linked with the Swiss Baptists – and they were members of the Baptist church in Rüschtikon. One of the professors (Günther Wagner) was member of the Faith and Order section of the WCC. He was participant in the working out of the so-called Lima papers on Baptism, Eucharist and ministry.

The Swiss Baptists were ambiguous towards the seminary. The majority thought its theology was too liberal, others said it was too remote in an ivory tower of academics.

The second and third point is linked to two outstanding persons. The pastor of the Zürich Baptist church and the president of the Union

4.2 Zürich Salem – Pastor Ernst Rödter

Ernst Rödter, pastor of the Zürich Baptist church from 1959 to 1998, was an outstanding preacher. He attracted people. Even students at the University (when I was enrolled there), were advised to visit his services. Beyond the local churches in the different parts of Switzerland – Baptists were identified with the Baptist church of Zürich.⁷

But: Rödter was fighting for the autonomy of the local church. The administrative board of the Union should have as little power as competence (The Union may not speak for the local churches). He thought that in relation to the number of members (about 1500) the Union was over-represented in ecumenical circles. Therefore he favored a retreat from those mandates. It was his initiative that the Union left the Conference of European Churches in 1987.

4.3 Prof. Claus Meister

Dr. Claus Meister was professor in the field of New Testament and Greek at the seminary in Rüschtikon. He was president of the Union from 1966-1981.

Meister had many personal contacts within the European Baptist Federation -both in East and West at those times. In Switzerland he was among the founding members of the “working community of Christian churches in Switzerland”.

Meister was – different from Rödter – also a person who stood for the whole Baptist Union. He was respected for his broad network within the ecumene and the European Baptists. But within the Union he was treated with a certain amount of suspicion. He wanted to have a strong Union, who represents a clear theological position in the choir of Christian churches. But it was his position and not the one of the churches. Meister never led an annual convention without having a theological topic on the agenda. Sad to say, that the discussions at the convention never brought fruits in the local churches.

In the context of relations to other churches and numerous bilateral study groups between different denominations on the Lima documents, there was a conference in the middle of

⁷ There even exists a doctoral thesis by W. Wagner: Growth patterns of Baptist churches in Europe, which made in empirical study including the Zürich Baptist church and their pastor. (William L Wagner: Eight Growing Baptist Churches in Western Europe, Brentwood, 1989)

the 1980s in Rüslikon with representatives from the Swiss Reformed church, Baptists and Mennonites. The conference ended on March 5th, 1983 with a service in the Grossmünster of Zürich where mutual confessions of guilt were pronounced and it ended in an act of reconciliation.

4.4 Theological issues

With the stimulation of Meister, there were two attempts of linking theology and church work.

4.4.1 Teaching inlets in the Swiss Baptist Journal

Meister suggested that the monthly magazine of the Union should have a folder included with the title: “church on the move”, which should deal with theological issues of every field. The idea behind was, that this material should be used by house groups. This was published for about 10 years. The project had from the beginning severe shortcomings. There was no curriculum at all. The editor looked for interesting topics and contributors without a vision. Second: the project was started without consulting the local churches. As far as I know the churches did not make use of these papers. If they wanted to have some kind of teaching material they got it from somewhere else.

4.4.2 School for diakonia and church-work

In 1980 the deaconesses motherhouse Salem opened a school for diakonia and church work.⁸ The objective was to offer a basic theological education accompanied with the same amount of courses in the field of social work. The school did not attempt to compete with the Theological-Diaconic seminary of the reformed church. Their level was lower. The idea was to train lay-people for church-work. For the deaconesses it was an attempt to open new ways of service, since the traditional diaconia was outdated. At the end of the century the school was closed – that is: it joined the school of the house of deacons of the reformed church. This was necessary due to a very low number of students, and at the same time to secure the training program for the enrolled students. Directors of the school were Elfi and Siegfried Karg from 1980-1985 and Dr. Heinz Rügger (1985 – the end).

There were some difficulties the school had to face right from the beginning: within the Baptist Union the market was too limited. Other free-churches showed no interest and most important: At the same time non-denominational institutions like “Campus for Christ” offered similar possibilities in the evangelical scene.

5 Outlook:

My closing remarks have a little negative touch – but I hope that the Swiss Baptist churches will take their stand in the concert of Christian churches in Switzerland and follow their calling.

But these are my thesis – looking back, not of today:

⁸ It is interesting, that this school is not mentioned in Nittnaus: Baptisten

Baptist Churches in Switzerland in the 19th and 20th Centuries- 10

1. With the exception of two, none of the existing Baptist churches in Switzerland were the product of mission work and church-planting. They grew out of dissenting groups in the environment of the rise of free-churches in Switzerland.
2. Baptists have not developed a strategy for evangelization.
3. Their idea of the autonomy of the local church is far too strong.
4. They have no common agreement on their theology. The majority of their pastors were left-wing evangelicals, the churches were much more oriented at main-stream or even right-wing evangelicals.
5. I believe that in the last quarter of the 20th century there was a lack of common Baptist identity.

The history of the Baptist churches in Switzerland needs some deep research, asking what were the theological issues that were discussed in the churches. What were the real visions, alive in the churches? These questions are not yet answered.

6 Bibliography

Nittnaus, Lothar: Baptisten in der Schweiz, ihre Wurzeln und ihre Geschichte, 2004, Berlin

Luckey, Hans: Gottfried Wilhelm Lehmann und die Entstehung einer deutschen Freikirche, Kassel: 1939.

Schindler, Regine: Johanna Spyri: Spurensuche. Pendo Verlag, Zürich 1997

Schindler, Regine: Die Memorabilien der Meta Heusser-Schweizer (1797-1876), (=Pfarrherren, Dichterinnen, Forscher. Lebenszeugnisse einer Zürcher Familie des 19. Jahrhunderts, Bd. 1), Zürich

Schneiter, Kaspar: Geschichte des Baptismus in der Schweiz, 1847 - 1978, 1979, Zürich

Wagner, William L: Eight Growing Baptist Churches in Western Europe, Brentwood, 1989

Woodfin, Carol: An Experiment in Christian Internationalism: A History of the European Baptist Theological Seminary, Baptist History & Heritage Society, 2013

<https://www.zvab.com/Einiges-Leben-Wirken-Nikolaus-Bernoulli-Criminalgerichtspraesidenten/22481993926/bd>; Einiges vom Leben und Wirken von Nikolaus Bernoulli, Criminalgerichtspraesidenten und Notar in Basel. Iselin, Wilhelm V.D.M.