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Baptist churches and society in Germany - some insights

Gunnar Bremer

How are the churches identified as Baptist doing in the home country of Gerhard Oncken, the Baptist missionary in Europe during the 19th century? What kind of situation are we facing as Baptists in Germany?

The membership numbers of German Baptists are decreasing slightly. Since the 1950s we have shrunk by about 15%. We have a growing number of foreign-language churches and groups – without them the decrease would be even more significant. However, Baptist churches are not facing this development alone: The Protestant as well as the Catholic Church in Germany have been losing a much higher number of members for many years now. Let me give you some facts and numbers.

In 1970 94% of the German population were members of a church. In 2010 – 40 years later – only 58% are church members. Today approximately one third of the population (35%) claims no denominational membership. This development is especially noticeable in big cities. It was learned during a survey in 2003 that in 18 major cities in Germany there are less than 50% who are at least formally Christians. Every year the percentage drops by 1 to 2 percentage points. Please notice – we are only talking about members of a church. If you ask the people if they believe in a personal God – which is one of the basics of the Christian faith – only 30% of all church members answer “Yes”. Church service attendance is even lower than that. In 2004 only 8% of the population attended a church service on a regular basis.

As a small free church in Germany we are not affected as badly as the Protestant and Catholic churches. But we follow the same trend. Yet we call ourselves a missionary movement. “Is mission a present subject in your church?” – this question was answered with “Yes” by 88% of Baptist church leaders in one of our Baptist associations in the south of Germany (Baden-Württemberg). More than two thirds of these churches had an evangelization in the past two years. The reasons for the answers from the others were not because they do not WANT to be missionary churches. The reasons are – so they said: they feel over-aged, or they do not have a pastor at the moment, they do not have the power for events, they have no ideas what to do. What are Baptist churches thinking about when they think of “Mission”? Almost two thirds of missionary activities take place within the walls of a church building. Mostly, the churches try to come up with special events which have the goal to explain the gospel to their guests. Their most common events are classic evangelization or special church services for non-believers, seeker

services. Other examples are low-threshold events like barbecues, indoor-playgrounds for children, art exhibitions, inviting the neighbors of the church to street-parties. Some churches offer their help for people in difficult situations: soup kitchens, blood donation events, homework tutoring etc.

But nevertheless, not much happens. Most churches state that even though they are trying, there is not much effect. People living close by the church do not want to be invited. Few people actually become believers and even fewer are baptized. Most of the people we are reaching are members of our families or from other churches. This is also the case with church planting projects. Mostly their growth is the result of Christians who want to belong to a younger or more vital church. It seems, we as Baptist churches have a lot of activities we call missionary or evangelistic. But these actions do not address the special needs of our society.

But why? "The church is a bunch of hypocrites, who are only following their own interests and who are turning those - who let them - into sheep without their own will, not thinking on their own anymore". I found this statement in an Internet discussion group on Yahoo. Two thirds of all Germans think that people who have strong religious beliefs are intolerant towards others (survey in 2002). Almost half of the Germans believe the world would be a lot more peaceful place if there were not any religions at all (2002). Many people mistrust all kinds of institutions, most of all religious institutions. Another statement from an Internet discussion group: "They turn their "truths" the way they are useful for their own organization."

We face a profound mistrust towards the Church and Christianity. Many think churches only abuse Jesus as figurehead for their own intentions. They accuse Christian churches of existing for themselves with only the aim to keep alive. They see mission as recruitment of new members to save the church. Christian programs are often seen as a lure to attract people to eventually incorporate and then to re-program them. What in particular arouses suspicion are radical positions towards other groups of people: Homosexual people, people who belong to other religions, as well as single mothers. When Christians handle their failures as inconsequential or try to cover them up - like child abuse in Christian schools - the mistrust grows even more.

In general we can recognize that Christians are seen as partly responsible for the situation of the world as it is today: economic crises, environmental exploitation and destruction, wars, the belief in the superiority of the Western concept of living, including its concentration on wealth and individualism. For centuries Christianity influenced and formed the western culture. Therefore in Germany we Christians and our faith are not seen as part of the solution to all these problems we face. Faith is seen as part of the existing problems. Because we believed in God over the last centuries, we as society stand where we stand right now. Almost all wars these days have a religious background or component. The Church is seen by many as co-responsible for the derailment of capitalism and the effects of an economy that operates worldwide without restraints.

What are we doing against all of this? Often German Baptists belong to the middle class and prefer to attract new members of the middle class. Accordingly, we try to respond to problems that affect middle class people: the boredom of wealth, search for meaning, morality, burnout syndrome, parenting problems, marital problems, self-esteem problems, careless attitude in life and – also regarding heaven.

Consequently we are not seen as the advocate of the poor and weak, as people who fight for justice and peace. We do not offer alternatives, we do not live models of life apart from the ruthless exploitation of the environment and human beings. I am convinced that the people of my culture would love to experience how the concept of following Jesus would enrich their life TODAY in such a way so they could get involved in radical and lasting changes. I am afraid they will not search for that in our churches.

We never see ourselves as responsible - but only others. When we talk about eternity and heaven it is seen as an empty promise. Because our own hope for eternal life in heaven has not set us free to become fully dedicated to help God's beloved people in their lives today. Instead of that, we offer informational events about Jesus, where we tell others where they are wrong and that they have to change their lives or we celebrate a barbecue party, using soft-pop worship to warm our souls. We offer an emotional experience with God so they would convert to him and we tell them to live correct moral lives.

This is why they turn their backs on us. This is why they do not expect us to have any answers – despite their religious desire. The reason is not only our lack of missionary activities, but because the people do not trust us anymore. So what can we do in a society, which is about to overcome Christianity? I tried to work out six personal thoughts on this question. Others probably can and will come up with other thoughts. My thoughts are neither comprehensive, nor do they intent to run down older understandings. What I want to do is only to try to set priorities. That's why I say "rather than" not "instead of". So, what can we do to face the challenges of our German society?

Relationship rather than program

This is probably an easily understood concept. When you ask Christians what was essential on their way to faith they do not name events, but a rather a person. A spouse, children, parents, friends, colleagues, also Pastors. Jesus himself acted like that: The individual is more important than a program. In front of the gates of Jericho a blind man cried: (Mk 10): "Son of David, have mercy on me!" A large group of people was on the way with Jesus to Jerusalem. Many of them tried to make the man keep quiet. But Jesus made all of them wait and turned to the one man. On another occasion in Acts 3: Peter and John were on their way to the temple for a service when a lame man started talking to them. Now the service had to wait. This one man was more important, right then. Even more – this was now their service, to be there for this man.

Institutions try to save themselves with programs. They stand for an organized life instead of authenticity. But relationships aim for the good of people. Let us look at what Christians spend their time with when they switch to the 'religious' mode. What do we spend our time and money for? When I ask this question in our churches they only think of church activities. Services, Bible studies, small groups, Alpha-Clubs, choir rehearsals, staff meetings. Those things also need to be prepared and planned. What about our money? - for houses in which programs and meetings take place - for pastors, who coordinate and conduct programs - for missionaries, who create Christian programs in our place. But how much are we willing to invest to actually be with people? How much time and energy is a relationship allowed to cost? A helping hand, a listening ear, a friend? What happens if we are forced to make decisions because we only have limited resources? Will we decide for the church program or for an individual?

In our churches Christians are much too often expected to make sure the church programs are running. In our understanding only then is a church a functioning church, when there are programs and events for everybody and everything. But what if the community of Christians would primarily support each other, so their members would have time for people and for living their relationships? Time is rare in our society. What if we Christians had more time, because it would be more important to us than the high quality of our church programs?

Variety rather than Standardization

When I come to churches they often ask: "What do we have to do to make our church grow, again?" They ask for a working plan. Sometimes they have actually already settled for a plan: seeker services, evangelistic small groups, Alpha Clubs, etc. The church leaders have agreed on a mission statement. Now people just need to go along with it. They ask me how they can motivate the church members for it.

This is typical for an institutional way of thinking. We want to be recognized - therefore we have to be big. A big thing creates more awareness than many little things. But God's mission is subjective - it is aimed at people, with people for people. John writes in his first letter (1Joh 1,1): "... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." I can only live and tell what Jesus has become to me personally. In the story in Acts 3, Peter says: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you." God's Mission is aimed at people, their personal resources and gifts. Taking Peter as a role model does not mean to copy him. Nobody needs to give what Peter gave. On one hand it is enough for me to bring - in Jesus' name - what has been given to me. On the other hand God's mission is oriented on other people's needs.

Again, Bartameus, the blind beggar on the gates of Jericho. Jesus asks him "What do you want me to do for you?" Accusing Christians of being arrogant is actually right, when we always think we already know what the other person needs are. Too often we give answers to questions that nobody asked. Even Jesus asks, even though it is obvious that the man is blind. Now that means - every time a follower of Christ comes across another person this is an absolutely unique meeting. Both of them are individuals, therefore there is a need to ask „Who are you?“ and “What do you need?“ "With my gifts and abilities, what can I bring from the Word of life?" How do need and possibilities come together in the name of Jesus?

There is not just one way. It is better for us to focus on Jesus, but allow many different - many human - ways even in a church. Better small authentic initiatives than big organized ones. That equates to the variety in which God created us.

Evolution rather than revolution

What is a Revolution? A Revolution is a sudden - often violent - change of a system back to its origin. It is something that many people in Jesus' time hoped for. They would have loved to see Messiah conquer the Romans and take over the leadership. However, God says: "I have time. First I'll become one of you, so you could know who I am."

When our mission - just like that of Jesus - asks: "What do you actually want me to do?" – then we need time to listen and to learn. That is the way Jesus acts. He takes 30 years to get to know his environment. He fits in without getting lost in the culture of his day. He listens to people, lives with them, learns their language, their thoughts, their desire, their strengths. No, not from a distance, but he experiences all this within himself as a human being. Only after 30 years did Jesus start to act, but then with a huge effect. World mission means to learn mission from the world, so we can get used to the living circumstances and only then change it - in a slow moving progress. There is time in God's Kingdom. That is what the word "evolution" means: Development by adapting to the environment. Only in this way can we make a difference.

Baptist churches in Germany should learn to live with people in our world, again, to be part of them. We need to learn from them and also learn how Jesus can have meaning in their lives, how he can work changes in them through his Holy Spirit. We need patience and the help of those people. We need first to understand them and also learn to love them.

Participation rather than provocation

This is in line with the third point. When Jesus reproached people, and told them where they were wrong, showed them their mistakes - he did that to the religious and powerful people of his time: Pharisees, Scribes and Priests. It will surely take a clear open word from Christians, about the wealthy West and the poor South, about unfair circumstances, about the destructive slavery of money. Supposedly they will listen to us in the same way the mighty people then listened to Jesus – not at all. They did not crucify him for criticizing even religious injustice. They crucified him because he gave people a chance to join him – join him without first asking about their beliefs or guilt or conversion and denomination. They were afraid of this army of followers.

Jesus asked people if they wanted to follow him and learn from him. Fishermen, tax collectors, freedom fighters like the Zealots. He asked them if they considered his life concept worthy to adapt to their lives. He did that without requiring any conditions.

A conversion is one step on the way, and not necessarily the first step. Only with time his students came to believe in him. But beforehand they were allowed to live with him and try him out. When he sent out the 70 people, he only prepared them. There was no perfectly staged Service-Show, but he sent them out into the authentic life. They were then convicted by their own experience! This is how Jesus lived his mission: people were allowed to participate.

We as Baptists mostly think of our friends when we think about people we want to lead to a life with Jesus. That is because they are like us and easy to handle. Next we probably think of the needy. Their need makes us ready to open up to them. Being needy also makes them tolerant – even towards us Christians. But we seldom invite successful people to join us on the way with Jesus. . Jesus's team did not consist only of people who were failures. There were businessmen, financial workers, politically committed people.

Jesus has shown us by his model what people in Germany ask for. They do not want to be overloaded with information. If something makes them start thinking it is a radically new way of life in the love of Jesus. Even in our country there are successful people who would like to be part

of a good thing. Together with us they can learn how enriching the Christian life can be while they get to know the one who makes that possible: Jesus.

Doing rather than talking

I am convinced that doing good to and for people is not Jesus' way to lure people to the gospel. Good deeds are proof, they are a consequence of the gospel. When Jesus said (Mt 5,16): "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." he was talking about giving praise to the Father - not to us. This is because the father makes it possible for people to stop looking at themselves and then to help others and share their faith by living it. Christian social work is worthy in itself because doing good will show the power of the gospel that sets people free to face the needs of others.

This testimony in action has often been more convincing in church history than the preached gospel. In the first century there were rumors about Christians sacrificing their children at the communion service – and talking did not help stop these rumors. More convincing than any rumors was love acted out. Believers risked their own lives by caring for patients ill with the pest – also for caring for those ones who did not believe in Jesus. That gave the people the courage to visit Christian gatherings despite all bad rumors.

But to make sure you do not get me wrong: The Gospel needs to be preached. How else can people understand what they see in us. But in Germany we first need to earn back the right with many people to preach the Gospel to them. We need our actions as an authentic frame for our spoken testimony. We have to act as Peter wrote in his first letter (1. Peter 3,15): "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

"When we are asked about our hope," what will we answer? Will we tell stories about how we found the Lord 20 years ago? Will we quote sentences like: "Jesus is my Lord and Savior." Everybody who wants to tell people about their life as a Christian must go to the people in need and be there for them. It's the most wonderful way to make experiences with Jesus. If you want to experience Jesus, you need to be with people. If you dive in with people, you come back up again with Jesus. That's why at last:

Commitment rather than Exercise of power

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." That is still the foundation of our faith. God gave and continues to give himself, because he loves the world. He became a servant, as part of it all, instead of standing over things. God's mission is a ministration to the world, because he loves the world – on an eye to eye level with the world. Mission serves people, not God. God did not send his son for himself, to become greater through it. We are doing ourselves good, if we do not preach down on people just because we are afraid of losing our greatness. "Do it like God, become a human." We better stand at people's side instead of rubbing salt into their wounds. We better go to them – just like God in Christ has done – instead of opening our doors and saying: "It is their own fault if they do not come in." After many Baptist churches in Germany have tried in the last decades to become more holy and get closer to God, we now should begin to follow God by giving our most precious possession to the world. This movement away from concentrating on

our own holiness and closeness to God seems to be a movement which will save people, an attitude that will give a new perspective and which will give to others the life God considers worthy for eternity.

Let me close with these words: When I think of Baptist churches and society in Germany, I believe that both have a new chance to experience Jesus when the day will come when we invest in relationships rather than in programs. Maybe that will change our culture of Baptist services. Maybe we will not have big church houses anymore. Maybe there will be a variety of different small groups. Because people simply *are* different. God loves variety. Maybe new forms of communities - of living together, working, praying and preaching - will arise. Maybe new partnerships with potential people will grow, guiding them to the helpless and then we can live and experience together the gospel of Jesus in a new way - on an eye to eye level.

This can happen if we will take the time and find out what the Gospel can mean to people in a society that mistrusts traditions, institutions and organized religion. This can happen if we invite people to help create God's Kingdom - and not save our churches. This will be a time when our actions legitimate our preaching, when we start living God's commitment, when we shrink the distances and again become lovers of the world.