

Ludwig von Rohden, Excerpts from *History of the Rhenish Missionary Society* (1857)

Abstract

This excerpt from Ludwig von Rohden's *History of the Rhenish Missionary Society* [*Geschichte der Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft*] describes the missionary activities of the Awakened (or born-again Christians) among "heathens" and Jews in the western German industrial cities of Elberfeld and Barmen, where this type of Protestant piety gradually flourished from modest beginnings. The group placed biblical revelation above human reason and denounced Protestant rationalism as well as the ideas of the French Revolution.

Source

Section One.

The Missionary Society in the Homeland.

Early History.

Just as the German Weser River owes its existence and name to the confluence of two streams that join their waters at Münden, the Rhenish Missionary Society owes its origin to the union of two important local missionary associations, which, reinforced by several subsidiary associations, combined their forces and gifts in the year 1828 to begin their common work in the name of God. These were the Elberfeld Missionary Society and the Barmen Missionary Society. The former already had many years behind it, having been founded as early as 1799; the latter, significantly younger, had been in existence only since 1818. Let us take a closer look at the history of both societies.

The beginnings of the Elberfeld Missionary Society lie in a barren and stormy time, when faith had died everywhere and love had grown cold, when the revolutionary storms coming from France were filling our German fatherland with poisonous vapours. Rigid death prevailed in the Protestant church of Germany. A solid and upright piety was certainly still found among the lower classes of urban dwellers and peasants, but the refined people were for the most part enlightened folk who smiled at the outdated superstitions. At that time, the Elder, Dr. Urlsperger of Augsburg, first conceived of the idea of uniting all scattered children of God into a "German Society for Christianity" [*deutsche Christenthumsgesellschaft*]. [It was] the first appearance on German soil of a free Christian association that would reach its hands across all barriers of churches, confessions, and parish boundaries to pursue a common goal without mediation by the hired clergy and the church authorities. How many Christian associations were later founded on this model, and in part grew out of it! The task the Society for Christianity set for itself was the preservation of the pure doctrine and a Christian way of life. The members were to strengthen each other in faith and confession; they joined for regular prayer, a conscientious observance of Sunday, the maintenance of household devotion, and strict discipline and self-examination. Wherever there were people "who take joy in the Gospel of Jesus, accept Him as their God and Lord, as the only mediator and saviour, who adhere to and follow Him and seek their salvation through Him, and who would like to join with true Christians," they were to be admitted into this society. In London and Basel this plan met with immediate approval. In both cities a select committee was set up that met at the beginning of every month, sifted through the incoming letters and essays, talked about important truths, and reported all the noteworthy things of the meeting to the other members in the minutes. Similar societies were set up in many German cities—from Stuttgart to Magdeburg and all the way to Berlin. All were in close contact

with one another and with Basel as their focal point. That is where they sent their minutes and reports, and from there the comprehensive general report or the chief minutes were, in turn, communicated to all individual societies.

The Elberfeld Missionary Society—and later the entire Rhenish Missionary Society—was also set up along the lines of this model. Bylaws, committees, monthly meetings, minutes, comprehensive reports that are communicated to each member—these are, indeed, the well-known forms of our associational life. For a long time, Elberfeld was in active communication with the Basel Society for Christianity. Yet the real impetus for the founding of a missionary society in Elberfeld did not come from Basel, but from England. The missionary zeal had awakened in a surprising way in that country in the closing decade of the last century and had spread to all churches. [...] The mere recognition that there still existed pious and zealous Christians who had such great trust in God's promises that they would undertake such an unusual and difficult endeavour worked like a spark of electricity on the rigid limbs of the German Protestant Church. In Elberfeld, too, there was plenty of death and ossification to be found. Though there was no lack of excellent, time-honored Christians, mighty worshippers filled with an eagerness to make sacrifices for the needs of the community, deeply grounded in Holy Scripture, and honorable in their entire conduct, they preferred to withdraw into small circles of friends, to have uplifting conversations, and to pray with a few chosen ones instead of exerting influence on the entire community by coming out in public. This was also the way in which the Elberfeld Missionary Society came together. When an association is established today, the first thing is to attract as many members as possible, to expound the purpose of the association to everyone in word and writing, and to present its activities and successes to the largest possible audience. But the founders of the first missionary society swore to maintain strict secrecy, and that there should never be more than twelve members. Very much in the manner of the conventicles, the meetings of the small band of missionary supporters began on June 3, Pentecost Monday of 1799, in the house of the venerable Ball in Elberfeld, this esteemed old man whose name has become known in broad circles through his sons. In the beginning there were only nine, all laymen, only one preacher among them, the Reformed pastor Wever. Later his younger colleague Nourney also joined, as did two burghers. What, then, did these venerable old men do? On every first Monday of the month, at eight o'clock in the evening, they came together and prayed, and read the missionary reports that had come in and the letters that had arrived from Christian friends in England, Holland, East Frisia, Frankfurt, and Basel. Together they drafted the responses, conversed about spiritual, pleasant things, placed donations of whatever amount in a collection box, and returned home praying. "It was a feast day every time," says a witness of the meetings, "for which the entire house prepared and looked forward to for days. In those days of deepest humiliation and the overthrow of all the empires of this world, they were mostly somber and dejected when they gathered around the simple table, but they left the room late at night happy and uplifted, for they had derived consolation from the kingdom whose glory radiated at them from God's great deeds in the heathen world." [...] The only modest activity with which they came out publicly was the publication of small pamphlets, especially the "News of the Spread of the Kingdom of Jesus," which was published in informal booklets and was translated from English missionary journals by the venerable Peltzer, the president of the association, who even at the age of sixty-six was learning the English language in order to do so. Needless to say, since there was little interest in the mission, this booklet sold very few copies. By contrast, the short tractates, sermons, speeches, and songs which the association published from time to time sold out more quickly, especially a series of so-called village talks, which had to be reprinted several times. Moreover, in 1802, emulating what the London association was doing, the members of the small association agreed to acquire a number of New Testaments and hymnals for distribution to needy confirmation students, "so that in this way, too, the word of God is spread among those who are closest to us." This was vigorously applauded, and it did not stop with the distribution to confirmation students; preachers, schoolteachers, and family fathers ordered and received bibles. Bibles were sent as far as Hesse and Lippe, Silesia, even Austria and Hungary, and at the same time the "News of the Kingdom of Jesus" made its way to Denmark and North America. That was in 1805. At that time the association of twelve men was in its heyday. And yet how

small and limited it all was. The income was only 345 Thaler, of which two-thirds belonged to the missionary fund, one-third to the bible fund. But then came the terrible year 1806, which paralyzed all external activity; this was followed by the even more difficult years 1809-1812, and the members of the association, left without any outside support, plagued by heavy worries of their own, often prevented by the need of the moment from even attending meetings, could now do nothing more than what they had primarily joined together for at the very beginning, to pray, to pray ever more fervently for the spread of the Kingdom of God. And that is what they did, with uncommon faithfulness. During all the unrest of war and change of rulers (how rapidly the men succeeded each other on the ducal throne of the Bergische Land, first Karl Theodor of Pfalz Neuburg from the house of Bavaria, next Max Joseph of Zweibrücken, Duke Wilhem of Bavaria, then Joachim Murat, Louis Napoleon, the Russian general governors, and finally Prussia's Friedrich Wilhelm) we see these splendid old men gathering regularly for the ever repeated plea: Lord, let your kingdom come! The turmoil of war must not invade their peaceful meetings; the terrible newspaper reports, their own sad experiences simply compel the even more sustained and fervent prayer that out of all this misery and confusion, the Lord shall help his cause and his people to victory. And was such faithful prayer not splendidly answered?

Peace returned in 1814, and more securely still in 1815. And now a new path of work and activity opened up for all friends of the Kingdom of God. Now the old prayer club had to take on a new form. Throughout the first fourteen years, it had always been the same twelve, faithful servants of God who—with rare interruptions—had met every month in the same place to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the coming of the Kingdom of Jesus. But now death quickly left one void after another in the tightly knit chain, and several members had to move away. What had hitherto been virtually the sole activity of the association, the distribution of bibles and tractates, was taken over in 1814 and continued on a larger scale by the newly founded Bergische Bible Society and the Wuppertal Tractate Society. Both were spiritual daughters of the small missionary society, and both took with them their share of the prayer capital the mother had accumulated. That was evident from their blessed beginning and their blessed continuation. To be sure, as long as patriarch Peltzer was still alive, until 1817, the Missionary Society itself continued essentially along the old tracks, even though nearly the entire personnel changed: prayer was still the most important thing, and the publication of booklet “News of the Spread of the Kingdom of Jesus” continued. However, the members—especially the new ones (the number twelve had already been exceeded)—were already eagerly on the lookout whether the Lord might not have other work for them, and intended to call them to direct participation in the missionary work. At that moment the first young man who wished to be trained for missionary service through the mediation of the Elberfeld Society came forward. One can imagine with what happy gratitude toward the Lord his application was accepted. His examination and training, his dispatch to Berlin to be trained there as a messenger to the heathens was seen by the friends as the first pledge that the Lord would one day grant their prayers the possibility of sending forth missionaries on their own. Like Moses from Mount Nebo, the 84-year-old president Peltzer looked across into the promised land, and in his faith already saw the messengers of peace going forth from Wuppertal into the heathen world. Then he died. Now only two of the old prayer-leagues of twelve were still left. Like Joshua and Caleb they extended into the new development of the Missionary Society, which still had to go through much struggle and uncertainty before it would truly reach the goal it had yearned and beseeched God for.

After 1817 there initially began a time when the newly joined forces first had to gain experience. New missionary associations appeared in many places and spurred on the old Elberfeld Association to compete with them. And it did not lack for energy and good will, if only it could be given a clearly circumscribed, clearly recognizable field of work. At that time several members were prompted in a very special way to work among the Jews in their immediate environment, and this provided the impetus for the society to devote itself for some time almost exclusively to disseminating the Gospel among the Jews, without losing sight of the mission to the heathens. Now it is well known, however, that the mission to the Jews is an exceedingly difficult task, abounding in deceptions and bitter experiences. And

on top of that, our society had chosen the most troublesome part of the mission to the Jews, namely the question of converts.

[...]

Let us also take a closer look at the brief history of the Barmen Missionary Society. It took a long time before Barmen decided to participate in the missionary work. Once, at the beginning of the century, when the Elberfeld Missionary Society invited the friends in Barmen to participate, the latter turned them down. Everything was still unclear and in flux. But when a new breath of spring swept through the German lands, when all powers began to stir under the mild and just rule of the Hohenzollern kings, and a feeling of security and well-being permeated everything, the subdued friends of the Kingdom of God lifted up their heads also in Barmen. The new stirrings were centered around a young and zealous preacher, whose memory as the real founder of the Barmen Society and later also the Rhenish Missionary Society will remain a blessing among us and all his many friends. He was pastor Leipoldt, initially an auxiliary preacher in Wichlinghausen, later pastor of the union^[1] parish of Unterbarmen. For some time, he had already been working to create a society of friends of the Bible and of missionary work, similar to what existed in Elberfeld; but the matter was still too unfamiliar to the parishioners, and in addition everything was in a kind of religious ferment, from which a new and fresh parish life had to take shape first. A visit from pastor Blumhardt helped them to surmount the initial difficulties. Blumhardt, the inspector of the newly established Missionary Society in Basel, was seeking to set up auxiliary societies for Basel also in this region. However, he found the ground in Barmen still so little prepared that he initially dared only to bring up the matter of the bibles. But when, in response to confidential questioning, he discussed at the length the purpose of the Basel Society and the progress in the heathen mission, a new meeting was immediately agreed upon, and on September 8, 1818, before a fairly numerous assembly, Blumhardt delivered a lecture that struck a chord. Together with young Leipoldt, he had already criss-crossed all of Barmen to personally look up and recruit the most capable and enthusiastic men. From them came the decision to establish themselves as an auxiliary association for the Basel Missionary Society, and initially to support one of the missionaries-in-training there through local contributions. The teacher Roßhoff became president, Herr Abr. Siebel became treasurer; Leipoldt assumed the modest position of secretary, but in fact he was the soul of the whole enterprise. All of Barmen was now divided into a number of troops or districts, and the members or directors of the society took on the task of holding an annual door-to-door collection in each district. Through a special invitation, friends in the neighboring cities were called upon to join the Barmen Society. So-called outside directors were appointed, and soon the incoming donations and gifts were so substantial that instead of one, no fewer than three missionaries-in-training in Basel could be supported from here; one of them was young Saltet from Cologne, who later did such blessed work in Georgia in the Caucasus. And after the required sum had been sent off to Basel, so much was left in the treasury already in the very first years that substantial gifts could be made to the Moravians, the Halle Missionary Institute, and the Jänicke Seminary. The rising, enterprising spirit of thriving Barmen, the fighting spirit and the happy hope for victory of the communities reawakened from a long strain and slumber were also so dominant in the small society, the youthful energy of the most outstanding members was so eager for work of their own, that one could not be content here with collecting and sending out contributions with regular meetings and the dissemination of missionary writings. After the excellent president had died in the fall of 1823 and pastor Sander, who was at the time in the prime of his youthful energy, had taken his place, missionary prayer hours were immediately begun, smaller associations of maids and manservants, of young men and unmarried women were set up, and with their modest contributions, the income nearly doubled. In 1824, the society even ventured to come forward by celebrating a public missionary festival—at the time an entirely unheard-of innovation, for which the committee almost believed it had to apologize to the friends.

As the Lord was then visibly blessing and promoting the society in all these things, with cheerful trust in

his future blessing, it took even more vigorous steps forward, and in 1825 conceived the plan for two endeavors whose fruits we are still enjoying today. For it established the Barmen Missionary Magazine [*Missionsblatt*], first published at the beginning of 1826; that same year it circulated in no fewer than 6,000 copies, the following year as many as 12,000, and later it had a printing of 21,000. Who would have dreamed of such success back then, when the small society first deliberated about the great difficulties of such an undertaking, and it was considered questionable to count on the sale of more than 1,000 copies. At that time the society prepared itself for considerable monetary losses, and how many thousands of Talers the magazine has since earned, what blessing has been bestowed by it among us and in far distant places! And just as the Lord blessed the missionary magazine, he also gave his richest blessing to the second undertaking: the founding of a missionary school, which the Barmen Society began in the same year of 1825. How small, how insignificant were also its beginnings, how far removed the members were from all expansive plans. All it was is that a few preachers of the valley and a few teachers agreed to provide instruction a few times a week to those young tradesmen who felt an urge for missionary service, but who did not dare or wish to make the uncertain journey to Basel or Berlin and try and be admitted there. The friends here were all but compelled to take this step. One should only recall the intellectual physiognomy of the valley in the early 1820s, especially after 1823. These were the days when, “on account of the sword of the spirit that enthusiastic and talented preachers had been wielding for some time, a new stirring of life coursed through all parishes. The churches could no longer contain the masses of listeners who crowded in; weekday services were attended in no smaller numbers than Sunday services. Especially on Sunday evenings, the surrounding forests resounded with spiritual songs, as did the houses and workshops on weekdays. For thousands of people, the interest in religion consumed every other interest. Sociable conversation usually revolved around goings-on in the church or the truths of Holy Scripture. An expectant cheerfulness formed the basic tenor in the mood of all believers, and a lively need to pour out their hearts and exchange ideas led the awakened one to assemble in countless, intimate circles of brothers every day after their work was finished.” This is the account by an eyewitness, himself a richly blessed servant of God in that blessed time. Small wonder that a great many young men, especially those who had come to Barmen and Elberfeld from outside, drawn into the stream of life that was flowing so powerfully through the valley, sought to consecrate themselves completely to the Lord as a sacrifice in the fire of the first love and signed up for service among the heathens.

NOTES

[1] Union: united Lutheran and Calvinist—ed.

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