

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE BAPTIST MOVEMENT AMONG THE HUNGARIANS AN INTRODUCTION TO A NEW STUDY OF HUNGARIAN BAPTIST ORIGINS

When reading a contemporary history of the Baptist movement, one will find much space devoted to the origins of the Baptist movement in England and its subsequent history in the Anglo-Saxon world, predominantly in Great Britain and the United States.¹ This is no doubt to be expected. Turning away from this focus, one finds the Baptist movement in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America viewed primarily through the prism of the missionary endeavors of various British and American mission societies. When one turns to the continental European Baptist movement, much mention is made of Johann Gerhard Oncken and his role as the father of the movement. The story moves in concentric circles from Hamburg outward. The farther one moves away from Hamburg, the briefer the narrative becomes. This is particularly true of the East European Baptist movements, with the exception of the story of the Russian Baptists. Among English-language works, one must rely on the pioneering efforts of J.H. Rushbrooke to get a more in-depth account of the continental movement.² While an important early work, Rushbrooke wrote in the spirit of a contemporary observer retelling recent history. In terms of genre the work could best be viewed as a mix of historiography and devotional missionary literature, with the aim being both to inform and inspire the English-speaking Baptist world. In regards to his treatment of the Baptist movement in Hungary, the broad outlines are given, but the full story of the triumphs and tensions of the movement remain untold.³

¹ See for example the formidable work of Southern Baptist scholar H. Leon McBeth, who admits to the deficiency of his treatment of East European Baptists due to language and primary source difficulties in his preface. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987). Note also the same emphasis in the standard work by Torbet. Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, Third ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963).

² J.H. Rushbrooke, *The Baptist Movement in the Continent of Europe*, Second Issue: Revised and Re-written (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1923).

³ Rushbrooke's work, however, has this advantage over the recent popular level introduction to the subject of the history of the continental Baptist movement by Ian Randall,

The aim of this study is to unfold the fascinating story of the origins of the Baptist movement among the Hungarians, and to ask and answer some questions which naturally arise from the narrative. While I hope the narrative will be inspiring, my first goal is to give a critical historiographical examination of the movement that seeks to place it within the broader context of its times. In this aim I differ somewhat from the work of the fine Hungarian Baptist church historians who have preceded me. Their primary audience has been their own faith community, and the goal of their historical explorations has been to present a narrative to their fellow believers that builds a Baptist identity and encourages the reader to live out that identity in their own walk and world. My own introduction into the field has come from the work of these men.⁴ But my primary audience is the academic community of historians, and in order to give a critical history I must attempt to transcend my own sympathies and first be a historian practicing his discipline.⁵ As such I have also sought to find and critically examine sources not known to my predecessors in order to provide a more rigorous narrative of the development of the Hungarian Baptist movement.

Before I proceed, a brief word on methodology is in order. My study strives to be more than a critical retelling of the story of the origins of the Hungarian Baptist movement. As noted above, my goal is to advance this area of study by bringing new sources to bear on the subject, and to make

in that he was often recounting narratives that he had heard first hand from the men involved in the Baptist missions. This was especially the case with the Hungarian Baptist mission, as Rushbrooke played a significant role in the Committee of the Baptist World Alliance mediating between the two sides into which the Hungarian movement had split following the recognition of the Magyar lead mission in 1905. Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction* (Schwarzenfeld, Germany: Neufeld Verlag, 2009), 137–46.

⁴ In a real sense I am operating within a tradition of Hungarian Baptist historiographical scholarship. As Robert Wilken argued concerning Christian intellectual life, “Without tradition, learning is arduous at best, impossible at worst. In most things in life—learning to speak, making cabinets, playing the violin—the only way to learn is by imitation, by letting someone else guide our movements until we learn to do the thing on our own.” Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 171.

⁵ I find helpful the argument put forward by D.W. Bebbington that history as a discipline is a science not in the sense of the physical sciences and classical scientific method, but in the sense of the German term *Wissenschaft*, as a systematic quest: “The discipline is nevertheless scientific in that it is critical of received opinion, rigorous in examining evidence and systematic in the presentation of its discoveries.” D.W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 4.