

# History of Baptists in Germany

## Baptists in the Eifel region of Germany

by Ingo Breuer



I lived in the Eifel region of Germany which is near the city of Cologne in West Germany. Nowadays this part of Germany is dominated by the Catholic religion, esp. since the time of the counterreformation at the end of the Middle Ages.

One wonders if there have ever been Baptist people in this area. The Catholic church has left her mark through its cathedrals and monasteries, some of which are almost a 1000 years old. But the Baptist faith has never been one that is tied to any material objects, such as any buildings and temples, but it has been the true religion of the heart that Jesus introduced when he said he looks for those who worship him in spirit and truth.

I felt discouraged because there are no Baptists living in my neighborhood. One day I began to dig in the history of our area in order to find out why there is such a great intolerance toward any evangelical faith in our area. What I found was amazing to me. Yes, there has been a considerable number of Baptists here in our part of Germany. This seems unreal at first glance, but it blesses my soul to know that there were big numbers of people here who stood foursquare for the Lord Jesus Christ and the Word of God. Here is what I found: the first trace of Baptist people can be found in the year 1535 near the city of Schleiden. This town was influenced by the Reformation, and back then the Baptists were mostly called Anabaptists and depicted as a fundamentalist fringe group of the Reformation. However, I want to say here for the sake of correctness that the Baptists have been here long before the Reformation. They used to practice baptism only for the converted soul and they would "rebaptize" those that had received infant baptism. At the German Reichstag in 1529 - a meeting of national leaders - the Baptist religion was considered to be subversive and the death penalty was threatened to those who practice Baptist faith. A history book says that most Baptists were simple folks who practiced pure Bible religion as in the early church, and they were willing to give their

life for that. Even a Catholic scholar from a nearby monastery who researched the local church history respectfully admitted to the great faithfulness and sacrificial way of life of the Baptists back in those days.

The oldest document telling of the Baptists in this area is a decree of the duke of Jülich against the "terrible, damned sect" from July 20, 1535. Their secret meetings were hard to stop for the authorities. It is also recorded that in 1547 the Baptist missionary Thönis von Hastenrath was working here. 11 people were baptized in the communities of Einruhr and Wollseifen. Both communities still exist today and are located in a valley in a very rural part over here.

In 1548 an agreement was reached by 3 influential people of this area to make a joint-effort to expunge the Baptists. These three men were the Freeman of Eltz-Pyrmont, who was notorious for suppressing the Baptist people; Count Dietrich of Schleiden, and Count Salm of Reifferscheid (castle of Reifferscheid still exists today). In that agreement the Baptist people were described as "trash". As a result many Baptists were imprisoned because of their confession. Many who refused to renounce their Biblical faith in Christ were robbed of their belongings and driven away from this area. This led to a considerable depletion of the population in many of the small rural communities. The town of Morsbach lost 1/7th of its population. Herhahn lost 1/6th, and Ettelscheid lost 1/5th of its population. All three communities still exist today and have a population of roughly 200 each.

It is also noteworthy that the Baptist faith was unanimously rejected by the leaders of the Reformation. Many people think that Baptists are Protestants. But the record of history shows that they are not. Here in Germany the Lutherans showed a profound hostility against Baptists, calling them fanatics ("Schwärmer"). In 1585 the Count of Schleiden, Dietrich VI, was urged by his Lutheran preachers to issue a decree requiring that all Baptists and Calvinists were to leave the area within 14 days. The Lutherans did this because they were about to become a well-established state church, and they did not want to be associated with Baptist "fringe groups" who were considered "heretics". Dietrich VI. also introduced a new "church order" that "obliges the worldly powers to root out all erring sects who oppose the true doctrines and sacraments."

Despite the very little religious liberty and the hostility, which is so contrary to our Savior's teachings, the Baptists remained here in this area till the 18th century, as the remaining few joined the Lutheran church. Others joined the Mennonites in Krefeld, Germany which is further north of the Eifel region. The first Mennonite to come to America was Jan Lensen. He arrived in October 1683 along with 12 German families who were Quaker weavers from Krefeld. They laid out the city of Germantown, Pennsylvania. It is very likely that some of the Baptist people of the Eifel region made it to America.

More Mennonites from Northern Germany and the Netherlands followed. Back then the ruler decided which church was authorized in his lands. This would, of course, be a state

church. The Baptists, however, wanted to be a people that is separated unto God and separated from the world. As a result, they could not find an earthly resting place in Europe. They were looking for a heavenly city, but they also wanted to live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty. In the early 1700s the Swiss Brethren (Baptist people from Switzerland) came to America in larger numbers and settled further inland. A small number settled near Conococheague Creek in the Cumberland Valley (Maryland). Others settled near the Shenandoah River in Virginia. The Amish people make up a smaller group of the Swiss Brethren. They originally come from Alsace in southwest Germany (today France). They were followers of Jakob Ammann.

Meanwhile my studies of the history of Baptists in this particular part of Germany have progressed a lot. With the help of a book called “The Martyr's Mirror“ more testimonies of Baptists were found. I now can document the presence of Baptists as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Premonstratensian provost Everwin of Steinfeld described to St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1140) the traits of a “heresy“ detected at Cologne which had its own bishop and organization. These were Waldenses. They totally rejected the widespread ideas of Catholicism such as purgatory. These rejected every tradition and every practice as superstitious if it was not instituted by Jesus Christ and the apostles. They kept the faith pure while the Catholic organization kept adding on new man-made doctrines, myths and traditions, thus perverting the true Christian faith.

All those findings are in German language. If you are interested in reading them, please click [here](#).