

Missionaries To The North

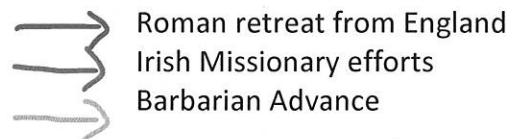
Historical Theology
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Scott Carlson

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND OF THE MISSION

As we have noted in earlier lessons, Christianity followed the Roman Army even before Rome became officially Christian. Believing soldiers took the message of the Gospel with them to the farthest reaches of the Empire, including the island of Britain.

With the Christianizing of Rome, came the Christianizing of Britain through the Romans who had settled there. By the 4th century, Christianity was so established as to produce the heretic Pelagius. By the 5th century, the church was mature enough to produce a young man, named Patrick. As we know at first, Patrick rebelled against his upbringing and then to come to faith in Christ after being kidnapped into slavery in Ireland. Escaping his captivity, Patrick returned to Britain, grew in his faith and returned as a missionary to the Irish.

The church never completely disappeared from Britain. However, when Roman soldiers left the island to meet the threat barbarians on mainland Europe in the late fifth century, Christianity declined. Christianity continued to thrive among the Scotch and the Irish, though it took a much different form than Roman Christianity. In central parts of the island (whence came Patrick), Christianity continued. However, in the south, there was a revival of paganism and generally, English Christianity was waning.



One day, Pope Gregory noticed some fair skinned, blonde-haired boys being sold at the slave market. He wondered who they were and was informed that they were Angles. Gregory replied, "These are not Angles (Angli), but angels (angeli)."

When he was told from that they were from Deire (Yorkshire), he replied, "They must be saved from *de ira* (the wrath) of God."

From this point on, Gregory became energized about a mission, not only to Britain, but to all parts north. He found the perfect man for the job in Augustine, then a prior of St. Andrew's Abbey in Rome. Along with other monks a group set out for Britain, to reintroduce the Gospel there.

I. AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

Almost nothing is known about Augustine's early life, though he was probably born in Rome and perhaps to an aristocratic family. He must have been a respected man to have been the prior of St. Andrew's monastery, where the pope himself was the abbot. Gregory knew of Augustine's skill in preaching and evangelism so chose him to lead the contingent of 40 monks on the mission to England.

On the journey they stopped in France, having heard of the dangers that lay in such a mission. The group sent Augustine back to Rome to seek permission to abort the trip, but Gregory refused, and the team continued, landing in Kent in 597.



Augustine took with him a copy of the Gospels known as St. Augustine's Gospel (above). Printed in the 5th century AD, it is the oldest, surviving, illustrated book of the Gospels and one of the oldest surviving books in Europe.

A. INITIAL SUCCESS

The team gained an audience with the pagan King Ethelbert who wouldn't speak with him indoors for fear of an evil spell, but met with them outdoors and showed them favor by allowing them to use St. Martin's Church and giving them freedom to evangelize among his subjects. This favor may have been due to the fact that Ethelbert's wife, Bertha, was a Christian. She had been the daughter of a Frankish King and had married Ethelbert on condition of her being able to continue practicing her religion.

One's religion was tied to the faith of the king, so largescale conversions didn't take place until Ethelbert himself became a follower of Christ. In letters dated 601AD, Augustine referred to the King's baptism. In the 15th century, historian Thomas Elmham gave the date of 597. Augustine founded monasteries on land donated by the king. Augustine wrote letters back and forth with Gregory asking advice for how to set the church in order. Gregory sent additional missionaries in 601 who brought along with them vessels to be used in worship and a pallium.

A pallium is the official robes worn by the pope, but they were also sent by the pope to church leaders to signify their promotion to Metropolitan or Archbishop. By sending the pallium, Gregory was



establishing an archdiocese, an area recognized by and under the jurisdiction of the pope. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the, today, the highest ecclesiastical authority in England. Augustine was the first.

Augustine continued to grow and establish the church throughout southern England, though he never extended his influence to Wales and other parts of Western England. Augustine died on May 26, 604.

B. A CHURCH OF ROME

As mentioned, Christianity had continued in the north even in the absence of the Romans due to the efforts of Irish missionaries. Since Ireland had never been a part of the Roman Empire, the church developed differently in the absence of Roman influence. Their worship services were different. Monks rather than bishops or priests governed the churches. Most importantly (to them), they observed Easter concurrent to the Jewish Passover.

Once Augustine evangelized Southern England, the Scotch-Irish Christians came into contact with the Roman Church. As you can imagine there was no small debate about which church should govern the Christians in Britain and Ireland. The debate continued for decades until the Synod of Whitby convened in 664AD, supporting the Roman Church. King Oswiu of Northumbria agreed to abide by the Synod and Irish customs eventually gave way to Roman.

In becoming Roman, one of the arguments was the connection of Peter to Rome and the idea that Peter held keys to the Kingdom. In many ways, Oswiu's decision was because he didn't want to get to heaven and be denied entrance by Peter.

II. SAINT BEDE

Much of what we know about the spread of Christianity in England is from the book, "The Ecclesiastical History of the English," written in 731 by St. Bede of Northumbria.

Bede's writings were extensive and included commentaries on 30 books of the Bible as well as other theological works. "Bede was one of the greatest teachers and writers of the Early Middle Ages and is considered by many historians to be the most important scholar of antiquity for the period between the death of Pope Gregory I in 604 and the coronation of Charlemagne in 800." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede. February 2022)

Bede is 1 of 36 "doctors" of the Roman Church and the only one from England. He is referred to as Bede the Venerable. A doctor in the Roman church is someone who has made significant contributions to theology through their study and writings.

III. BONIFACE TO GERMANY

Christianity was thriving in England in the 7th century, seeing not only the establishing of the Roman Church, but the birth and ministry of Bede, and the birth of one of the greatest missionaries the church produced, Boniface, born Winfrith or Winfred, in Devon (Southern England) in 675AD.

A. WINFRID'S EARLY LIFE

Winfrid grew up in a wealthy Christian home, where church leaders would often visit. He enjoyed just sitting and listening the adults talk about Christ. He was taught in local monasteries until he finally felt called to join the monastery at Exeter. His father strenuously objected, but after a bad omen, which he saw as a sign from God, he relented. For 30 years, Winfrid was content to study at the monastery.

B. WINFRID'S FIRST MISSION

In his early 40s, grew concerned for people in Europe. In 716, he went to Utrecht (Holland) to

join a missionary named Willibrord who had been working there for some 20 years. Their efforts were frustrated by wars between the Franks and Frisians. The missionaries both fled, Willibrord to Luxembourg and Winfrid to England, though not to his home county.

C. WINFRID TO ROME THEN PARTS NORTH

In 718, Winfrid left England for the final time and went to Rome. He met Pope Gregory II and no doubt told him of his desire to reach the tribes north of the Alps. Gregory renamed Winfrid “Boniface” (doer of good), appointed him bishop of an area that was as yet without a diocese, and commissioned him to go to the Germans with the Gospel.



Boniface's early travels

Of course, Germany was not an unreached people group. However, paganism was rampant, and Rome had no influence over the area. In addition to winning the pagans to Christ, Boniface, reformed

the church and brought it under Rome. He also came to have great influence over the Carolingian Dynasty, being asked to crown the Pepin the Short at His coronation in 751.

Perhaps the most well-known story of Boniface also introduced the Christmas tree.

Willibald, The Life of St. Bonifaceⁱ

Now at that time many of the Hessians...refused to accept in their entirety the lessons of the inviolate faith. Moreover some were wont secretly, some openly to sacrifice to trees and springs...With the advice and counsel..., the saint attempted... to fell a certain oak of extraordinary size, which is called, by an old name of the pagans, the Oak of Jupiter. And when in the strength of his steadfast heart he had cut the lower notch, there was present a great multitude of pagans, who in their souls were earnestly cursing the enemy of their gods. But when the fore side of the tree was notched only a little, suddenly the oak's vast bulk, driven by a blast from above, crashed to the ground, shivering its crown of branches as it fell; and, as if by the gracious compensation of the Most High, it was also burst into four parts, and four trunks of huge size, equal in length, were seen, unwrought by the brethren who stood by. At this sight the pagans who before had cursed now, on the contrary, believed, and blessed the Lord, and put away their former reviling.

Norman Cantor

[Boniface is considered] “one of the truly outstanding creators of the first Europe, as the apostle of Germania, the reformer of the Frankish church, and the chief fomentor of the alliance between the papacy and the Carolingian family.”ⁱⁱ

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- ? What comes to your mind when you think of Augustine and Boniface as missionaries?
- ? How did the missions they went on differ from previous missionary efforts?
- ? How did the missions differ from missions today?
- ? What is the significance of the Church in Europe coming under Roman governance?

ⁱ Robinson, George W. (trans.) (1916). *The Life of Saint Boniface by Willibald*. Harvard University Press.

ⁱⁱ Cantor, Norman F. (1994). *The civilization of the Middle Ages: a completely revised and expanded edition of Medieval history, the life and death of a civilization*.