

CHAPTER 9 : THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE CELTIC AND GERMANIC PEOPLES

Long before the Roman empire fell, many Celtic peoples had already embraced Christianity. We have previously recounted how the Celtic Britons adopted Christianity. Although Patrick (who lived c. 373-461 AD) of Britain was not the first missionary to Celtic Ireland, his missionary endeavors enjoyed some of the greatest fruits there. So as the Roman empire was falling, the Celtic British Isles were significantly Christian. While the Christianity there was tainted by certain errors, and though the knowledge of scripture was too much hidden from the population at large, nevertheless Celtic Christianity avoided some of the sins of the churches more tightly controlled by the church of Rome, such as the use of images in worship and intercession by saints and martyrs. Furthermore, Celtic Christianity did not bow to the bishop of Rome as the Supreme Pontiff of Christendom.

The British monk Pelagius had for a season infected the Christianity of the Britons with Pelagianism. But this heresy was squelched among the Britons, primarily through the preaching of a bishop Germanus of Auxerre.

Once the Roman imperial armies had vacated the British Isles, the Christian Britons were subject to frequent attacks from pagan Picts to their north. These Picts lived in what is today Scotland, and were distinguished by the pictures they painted on their bodies, from whence they got their name Picts. (Of course, such tattooing was a mark of their pagan culture, being contrary to the word of God.)

King Vortigern of the Britons made the fateful error of asking the assistance of the pagan Saxons in his fight with the Picts. These Saxons were a Germanic people living in what is now northwestern Germany and the eastern Netherlands. In a very short order many pagan Saxons came to Britain in 450 AD, so much so that the danger to the Britons posed by the Saxons was greater than that posed by the Picts. And more pagan Germanic peoples – the Angles and the Jutes- came to Britain as well. It is in fact from the Angles (German: *Angeln*, Old English: *Englas*) that England obtained its name.

Eventually, the Britons had to retreat from current day England altogether, back to their refuge in the hills of Wales. Meantime, the pagan Saxons, Angles, and Jutes controlled what is current day England. And the pagan Picts continued their control of much of what is today Scotland. So the island of Britain largely reverted back to paganism from Christianity.

But God was merciful, and supplied a great missionary to the island again: Columba. Columba (521-597 AD) was an Irish missionary who helped re-introduce Christianity to Scotland and northern England. He was born in Donegal, Ireland. He became a monk and later a priest. Tradition asserts that, sometime around 560, he became involved in a copyright wrangle with Finnian over a psalter. The dispute eventually led to a pitched battle in 561 during which many men were killed. As penance for these deaths, Columba determined to engage in Christian missions. In 563 he founded a monastery on the island

of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, which became the center of his evangelising mission to the Picts of Scotland. His missionary efforts were blessed with many fruits among the Picts.

Iona gained fame not only as a great missionary outpost, but also as an outstanding place of learning. People throughout Europe would travel to Iona. Due to its notoriety, many kings of Scotland (48), Ireland (4) and Norway (8) were buried there.

But the Germanic peoples in England still remained pagan and in need of the gospel. Because of the hostility between the Christian Britons and the pagan Saxons, there was little Christian missionary enterprise by the Britons among the Saxons. This left the door open for the bishop of Rome to extend his power. In 597 the Roman brand of Christianity was brought to Britain for the first time by Augustine, the missionary sent from Pope Gregory to convert the Saxons. (This is not the same Augustine that was bishop of Hippo centuries earlier.) Landing in the territory of the Cantware, the Men of Kent, Augustine founded a monastery and the first church at Canterbury, and was proclaimed its first Archbishop. The Saxon king Ethelbert of Kent was converted to Christianity through the ministry of Augustine.

When Augustine attempted to meet with a delegation of seven British bishops on the borders of the domains of Ethelbert of Kent, these bishops refused to talk or even dine with his party; and when Aethelfrith of Northumbria went to battle with Solomon, son of Cynan, king of Powys, hundreds of British Christian monks are said to have assembled to pray for the Venedotian king. Working with the Saxons, Augustine even had many British monks put to death, which led to a decline in British scholarship, for British scholarship largely resided in the hands of the monks. So there was considerable competition and even ill-will between Roman Catholic Christianity and Celtic Christianity at this time.

The competition manifested itself at the synod of Whitby in 664. This synod attempted to iron out the differences between Roman Catholic and Celtic Christianity. It was a huge landmark for Christianity in the United Kingdom. Christians from the south who followed the Roman traditions brought over originally by Augustine, and Celtic Christians from the north and west of the country, met at the Abbey in Whitby. The Roman view was most influential at the synod, and although the Celtic tradition did continue, its followers retreated to the Celtic fringes of Britain in the aftermath of the synod.

One of the significant matters at issue was the date of Easter, which is a telling indication of the state of Christianity that this should be a matter at all, Easter being foreign from Biblical Christianity. In any case, the Roman monks who had been sent by Gregory the Great to convert the English to Christianity, found that the missionaries from Ireland observed Easter at a different time from that which had been appointed by the Roman church. After years of controversy it was agreed that this synod should be held where this difficulty, and others, might be settled.

A famous English monk, by the name of The Venerable Bede, penned a chronicle of the synod. He thus describes the arguments advanced by both sides and gives an account of the victory of the Roman party:

“ Bishop Colman spoke for the Scots (i.e. Irish) and said: The Easter which I keep I received from my elders, who sent me hither as bishop; all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are known to have kept it after the same manner; and that this may not seem to any contemptible or worthy to be rejected, it is the same which St. John the Evangelist, the disciple beloved of our Lord, with all the churches he presided, is recorded to have observed.” . . .

Then Wilfrid was ordered by the king to speak for the Roman practice: " The Easter which we observe we saw, celebrated by all at Rome, where the blessed apostles, Peter, and Paul, lived, taught, suffered, and were buried - we saw the same done in Italy and in France, when we traveled through those countries for pilgrimage and prayer. We found that Easter was celebrated at one and the same time in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and all the world, wherever the Church of Christ is spread abroad, through the various nations and tongues ; except only among these and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who foolishly, in these two remote islands of the world, and only in part even of them, oppose all the rest of the universe. . . .

You certainly sin if, having heard the decree of the apostolic see, and of the universal Church, and that the same is confirmed by Holy Writ, you refuse to follow them; for, though your fathers were holy, do you think that their small number, in a corner of the remotest island, is to be preferred before the universal Church of Christ throughout the world ? And though that Columba of yours (and, I may say, ours also, if he was Christ's servant) was a holy man and powerful in miracles, yet should he be preferred before the most blessed prince of the apostles, to whom our Lord said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give up to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven'?"

When Wilfrid had spoken thus, the king said, "Is it true, Colman, that these words were spoken to Peter by our Lord?" He answered, "It is true, O king!" Then said he, "Can you show any such power given to your Columba?" Colman answered, "None." Then added the king, " Do both of you agree that these words were principally directed to Peter, and that the keys of heaven were given to him by our Lord?" They both answered, , We do." , Then the king concluded "And I also say unto you, that he is the doorkeeper, whorl I will not contradict, but will, as far as I know and am able in all things obey his decrees, lest when I come to the gate of the kingdom of heaven there should be none to open them he being my adversary who is proved to have the keys." The king having said this, all present, both great and small gave their assent and, renouncing the more imperfect institution, resolved to conform to that which they found to be better.”

The English, along with so much of Europe, was largely deceived by the fallacious argument of Rome on the Petrine rationale.

The conversion of the Germanic peoples of England to Roman Catholic Christianity served as the base from which other Germanic peoples were converted in northern Europe. Before one hundred years had passed from their own conversion, the Saxons and Angles sent out the missionary Boniface, who first converted the Teutons in Germany.

Boniface (680-755), known as the Apostle of Germany, was born in Devonshire, England. He was of good family, and it was somewhat against his father's wishes that he devoted himself at an early age to the monastic life. He received his theological training in the monasteries of Exeter and Nutcell, and at the age of thirty became a priest.

In 715 he set out on a missionary expedition to Frisia, intending to be able to convert them by preaching to them in their own language, his own Anglo-Saxon language being similar to Frisian, but his efforts were frustrated by the war then being carried on between Charles Martel and Radbod, king of the Frisians.

Boniface again set out in 718, visited Rome, and was granted a commission by Pope Gregory II to reorganize the church in Germany and preach to pagans there. For five years he labored in Thuringia, Hesse, and Frisia, and then returned to Rome to report his success. During this visit Pope Gregory II made him a bishop. He again set out for Germany, and, armed with full powers from the Pope, baptized thousands of the heathen, and dealt with the problems of many other Christians who had fallen out of contact with the regular hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church.

After another visit to Rome in 738 he proceeded to Bavaria, and founded there the bishoprics of Salzburg, Regensburg, Freising and Passau. In 742, one of his chief disciples, Sturm, founded the abbey of Fulda not too far from Boniface's earlier missionary outpost at Fritzlar. Although Sturm was the founding abbot of Fulda, Boniface was very involved in the foundation. The initial grant for the abbey was signed by Carloman, the son of Charles Martel. The support of the Mayors of the Palace and later, the early Pippinid and Carolingian rulers, was important to Boniface's success. Boniface balanced this support and attempted to maintain some independence, however, by attaining the support of the papacy and of the Agilolfing rulers of Bavaria.

After returning from his mission in Bavaria, Boniface resumed his labors in Germany, where he founded the dioceses of Würzburg, Erfurt and Buraburg. By appointing his own followers as bishops, he was able to retain some independence from the Carolingian rulers. He also organised provincial synods in the Frankish Church, and maintained a sometimes turbulent relationship with the king of the Franks, Pepin, whom he may have crowned at Soissons in 751. Boniface had been created a bishop by Gregory II, and after the deposition of the bishop of Mainz in 745, Boniface was granted the metropolitan see.

He had never relinquished his hope of converting the Frisians, and in 755 he set out with a small retinue for Frisia. He baptized a great number, and summoned a general meeting for confirmation at a place not far from Dokkum, between Franeker and Groningen. Instead of his converts, however, there appeared a mob of armed pagans, who fell upon the aged archbishop and slew him.

Later yet, the Saxons in continental Europe converted to Christianity. They had formed from the eighth century the Duchy of Saxony. They long avoided becoming Christians and being incorporated into the orbit of the Frankish kingdom. Centuries earlier the Frankish kingdom had joined the Catholic Church. The Frankish kingdom, consisting of a Germanic people, was an important instrument in the extension of Papal power, as we shall consider in the next chapter. The pagan Saxons were decisively conquered by the Frankish king Charlemagne in a long series of annual campaigns (772-804). With defeat came the enforced baptism and conversion of the Saxon leaders and their people.

By various means- even including war, treachery, and deception- the Bishop of Rome and his minions thus brought much of Christendom into the Papal fold.

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.