

Medieval Missions

In this lesson I will focus on one of the aspects brought up in the previous overview of the second 500 years of the history of Christianity, which is the topic of missions. Gregory the Great was one of the important missionary popes of the medieval period. I will begin with a prayer from Gregory the Great.

“O Christ, our King, Creator, Lord, Savior of all who trust Thy word, to them who seek Thee ever near, now to our praises, bend Thine ear. Thou didst create the stars of night; yet Thou hast veiled in flesh Thy light, hast designed a mortal form to wear, a mortal’s painful lot to bear. When Thou didst hang upon the tree, the quaking earth acknowledged Thee; when Thou didst there yield up Thy breath, the world grew dark as shades of death. Now in Thy Father’s glory high, Great Conqueror, nevermore to die, us by Thy mighty power defend, and reign through ages without end. Amen.”

Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette has referred to the nineteenth century as “the great century of missions.” That was the title he used for three of his books in his famous seven-volume history of the expansion of Christianity. It is certainly true that the nineteenth century was the great century of missions. The medieval church was involved in missions as well. In this lesson and the next I will present the activity of the medieval church in missions. I will introduce people such as Ulfilas, Patrick, Saint Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface, and a host of others. Some will be known to you but many will be unknown. They faithfully took the Gospel into the world during that period of the Middle Ages.

I have not talked about missions for a while. As we think of the spread of the Gospel to the limits of the Roman Empire and beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, we do not know most of the missionaries. Most of the missionaries of that earlier period are unnamed and unknown. At least they are unknown to us, although certainly not to God. They were men and women who went out with the Gospel. As they went for various purposes—business, the military, or something else—they faithfully took the Gospel with them. In that way, the Gospel went to the limits of the Roman Empire and even beyond. John of Damascus spoke of “unarmed, poor, unlettered, persecuted, tormented, done-to-death men [and women]” who were the missionaries. As they went forth, God blessed their efforts. By the power of His Spirit others were brought into the Christian faith. Because of the work of those people, when the barbarians began to enter the Roman Empire, they had already heard of Christ. The missionaries had gone beyond the limits of the Roman Empire, and so when the barbarians attacked Rome, if they were not already Christians, they had at least been evangelized.

In the later period, from the fourth century through the Middle Ages, we know many of the names of the great missionaries. For example, we know the name of Ulfilas. He was a fourth-century missionary who was instrumental in the conversion of the Goths, one of the barbarian groups north of the Danube. Ulfilas has a Gothic name, which means “little wolf.” Yet his ancestry was not Gothic, it was Greek. Ulfilas’ grandparents had lived in Cappadocia, in Asia, the land of the church fathers, the great Cappadocians. His grandparents had been captured by the Goths in a raid that the Goths made into that territory. The Goths took some slaves back with them to the north. Those grandparents were Christian people, and their grandson Ulfilas, as he was called by the Goths, was appointed bishop of all the Goths north of the Danube.

One of the great things he did was to translate the Bible into the Gothic language. It is the oldest literary work in any German language. His work of translation is an interesting story, because he translated all of the books of the Bible into Gothic except 1 Kings and 2 Kings. He said the Goths did not need 1

Kings and 2 Kings because they knew how to fight already. He thought if they read those books it would encourage them more in their warlike nature. So Ulfilas omitted those books from his translation.

While Ulfilas was a great missionary, unfortunately he was an Arian. He had learned Arianism, and many people of the fourth century were Arians until orthodoxy prevailed in the Roman Empire after the Council of Nicea in 325. As Ulfilas went back to his homeland, north of the Danube, he took with him and preached there the Arian creed. He taught that there is only one God, and that God has only one Son, who is the maker of all creation, and there is no one else like Him, but He is not *homoousios* with the Father. That message appealed to the Goths. One reason it appealed to them was that it was very simple. There is one God and that God has a Son and that Son is next to God in importance and the Holy Spirit is next to those two in importance. That was a very simple message that they could understand. The Goths also liked the idea of Christ the Son as a kind of hero, a super-man, like a military leader. Thus Arian Christology was the basic form of Christianity that was preached to the Goths. Arianism spread from the Goths throughout the Germanic tribes and down into the Roman world. The result was that 200 years after the Council of Nicea the old Roman Empire was theologically divided. There was Catholic territory, in the east, west, and north, but in other areas, such as in Italy and North Africa, Arianism was prevalent. Arianism was still very prominent in the Roman world 200 years after the Council of Nicea because it first went to the north, to the Goths and others, and when they invaded the Roman world they brought an Arian form of Christianity back into the old Roman Empire.

The fact that Arianism did not finally prevail everywhere was due largely to the conversion of another barbarian group called the Franks. The Franks were converted directly to orthodox Christianity. The story of the conversion of the Franks, which took place around 500, has to do with a queen named Clotilde and a king, her husband, Clovis. Clotilde was an orthodox Christian. She married the king of the Franks, Clovis, and she began right away to try to convert him to Christianity. It was not easy, but she eventually prevailed. Clovis became a Christian in 496, and when he became a Christian all the Franks became Christians. In those days, when the king made a choice about a religious allegiance, the people were forced to join him, whether they wanted to or not. The idea of individual conversion was not as prevalent as that of group conversion. So the king, Clovis, and the people of the Franks, were converted in 496.

There is a story about the baptism of the Franks. They were a warlike people. All of the barbarian tribes were warlike. It was what they were good at. At the baptism of the Franks, a mass baptism of the Frankish army and people, as the soldiers were being baptized, they held up their right hands. It was not a salute to the Lord, but rather it was so that their right hands would not be baptized as the water fell on them. They wanted to continue to fight. So even though they were baptized, they tried to remain not totally baptized so that their right hands could continue to do what they did best, which was fight. In the providence of God, even that worked out for good. The Franks helped to convert the Arian tribes to orthodoxy. It was somewhat by persuasion, but mainly by the sword. So the Arians gradually disappeared, and western Europe became entirely orthodox in its theology.

The missionary movement during the second 500 years of Christianity had four centers. One center was Rome. Rome was primarily sending missionaries to the north. The most important of those missions was that sent by Gregory the Great to England. The missionary was Saint Augustine of Canterbury. By the time Saint Augustine arrived in England, there was already an important missionary-sending area, which was Ireland. That is surprising because Ireland was considered to be on the fringe of the European world. Patrick went from England to Ireland. Then missionaries such as Saint Columba and Columbanus went from Ireland to Scotland to England and then down to the continent of Europe. So Rome was a center of missionary activity. Ireland and England were centers. Persia, in the East, became a center as

Persian monk missionaries traveled the old Silk Road all the way to China. They established the Nestorian church in China in the seventh century. The fourth great center of missionary activity in the medieval period was Constantinople, with missionaries going north to the Slavs and north and east into Ukraine and Russia. So there were four distinct centers of missionary impetus. There were other minor centers, but the four significant centers of missionary activity were Rome, England and Ireland, Persia, and Constantinople. The entirety of the next lesson will cover the Christianization of Great Britain.

I want to focus now on providing some detail about the Persian, Nestorian missionary efforts to China in the seventh century. I mentioned it in the previous overview lesson, but I will focus on it again because it is something we should not ignore. Missionary expansion was not only to the north. It also went to the Far East, to the nomads of central Asia, and then all the way to China. The Old Silk Road went all the way from the Roman world to China. It was one of the several routes that merchants took in order to travel to China to get silk to bring back to the West. People were constantly on the move on that Old Silk Road, including missionaries. The road provided a route for the missionaries to China, just as the old Roman roads had provided routes for Paul and the other early missionaries to travel throughout the Roman Empire.

The Persian missionary Alopen reached Chang-an, the capital of China, in 635. Chang-an was the largest city in the world at that time. It was one of the most prosperous and advanced cultures. So as the missionaries went to China they were not going to a backward place. They were going to a cosmopolitan world capital. It was a place much more advanced in arts and sciences than the European capitals of that time. When Alopen arrived in Chang-an in 635 it was the time of the T'ang dynasty, which is one of the most famous of the ruling dynasties of China.

The first Christian church was built in Chang-an in 638. So only three years after the first missionary arrived, there was already a Christian church in the largest city in the world, the capitol of one of the most advanced cultures in the world. Despite persecution from Buddhists, Christianity grew. It seemed that China would become a great center for Christianity, as Constantinople and Rome had become. The Nestorian church almost totally disappeared, however, in the ninth century. After such a promising beginning, with high hopes that Christianity would have a strong Eastern base, the church in China virtually disappeared.

Scholars have debated the reasons for the disappearance of the church in China. Some have pointed to persecution. Certainly there was persecution, particularly after Buddhism was declared the state religion in 698. Others have thought that it was theological compromise. There was some syncretism in the Nestorian church. Overall, however, it seems that the church maintained its orthodoxy. In the interests of contextualizing Christianity to Chinese culture, the church may have at times passed over the line from contextualization to syncretism. That is easy to do. Another factor that is brought up is the foreign orientation of the church. It was originally a Syrian church that had found its base in China and had then been transported to China. As people have looked at the records of that Nestorian church in China, however, those writings were not in Syriac—the official language of the Persian church, as Latin was of the Roman church—but rather the writings were in Chinese. It seems that the Nestorian church was not totally viewed as a foreign church.

Many people have agreed that the real problem for the church in China was that it had allied itself very closely with the T'ang dynasty. That Chinese noble imperial house that ruled China for some time had become the promoter and protector of Christianity. There were, however, other houses and other forces at work in China. Eventually those forces brought about the fall of the T'ang dynasty in 907. It appears that Christianity fell with it. Thus we may point to the main reason for the fall of the church in China,

that it was viewed as an arm of that imperial house, something like a department of religion of that house. When the T'ang dynasty fell, the church fell too. It is not the only time in church history that we see that dependence upon the government for the survival of the church is a very dangerous thing. It provides an uncertain foundation. A discouraged Nestorian monk living in Baghdad in 987 said, "There is not a single Christian left in China." He may have been right, or he may have been wrong, but there was not a church left in China. When missionaries returned to China centuries later, they knew nothing about the earlier Christian church that had existed there.

About the time that Christianity was disappearing in China it was beginning to take new life in the other end of Asia, in Russia, Ukraine, and among the Slavic peoples of Europe. Missionaries were pressing from Constantinople up into the north among the Slavic people. Constantinople was at the time the center of the Eastern part of the church, even though the church was not officially divided between the Eastern and Western halves until 1054. The differences were there long before 1054. We can begin to think of Eastern Orthodoxy when we think of the church in Constantinople even in the tenth century. The missionaries from Constantinople were restricted in their movement to the east and the south by Islam, which was pressing in on the very borders of Constantinople at the time. Missionaries from the Eastern part of the church were restricted in their movement west by Roman Catholicism. Thus the natural direction for the movement of Christian missionaries from Constantinople was to the north.

Two Greek brothers, Cyril and Methodius, were sent by the emperor in 862 to preach in Moravia, which is modern-day Austria. These two missionaries who moved to Austria produced an alphabet and translated the Bible into Slavonic. They also translated liturgies, or a service book, into Slavonic. This was quite different from the missionary strategy of Rome. The missionaries of Rome took Latin with them and taught the people to read the Latin Bible, and they conducted Mass in Latin. The Eastern missionaries, however, did not usually use Greek, but rather they translated the Bible and the liturgy into the language of the people to whom they were ministering.

One other missionary in the north is worth mentioning. His name was Ansgar. He was not from Constantinople. He was from the Roman church. He was appointed bishop in Hamburg in Germany. His ordination or appointment was actually focused on Denmark. The Scandinavian area was not yet Christian. The church began to look for ways to reach Scandinavia. Ansgar planted several churches in Denmark in the ninth century. When he died in 865, however, those churches disappeared. Nothing came of his work. In my view he is worth mentioning because sometimes we do not have great stories to tell. A missionary can be faithful and do the work he is supposed to do and yet not have any great results from it. That was the case of the first mission to Denmark. Stephen Neil said it well in his book, *A History of Christian Missions*, "Ansgar pushed against a door that was not yet ready to open." Eventually that door would open, but it was not ready at that time. I believe that in the providence of God it was important that this missionary bishop push against that door even though it did not open at that time. We do not know how his pushing against that door may have contributed to the eventual evangelization of the Scandinavian people.

If that door into Scandinavia was not yet ready to open, there was a very large door that was opening as Ansgar was pushing against the door that would not open into Denmark. The large door that was opening at that time was Russia and Ukraine. The history of Christianity in Ukraine and Russia is traced back to a decision that Prince Vladimir in Kiev made in 988. Once again it was an example of a prince making a decision and his decision becoming that of the people. According to the legend, Prince Vladimir wanted to find a new religion for his people. So he sent emissaries to check out Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Greek Christianity centered in Constantinople. Of course, they all came back with various reports. Vladimir turned down Islam. He considered Roman Catholicism. Yet he liked what he

heard about Greek Orthodoxy. Partly this was because when the emissaries from Kiev arrived in Constantinople and saw the Hagia Sofia they were overwhelmed by the beauty of it, as well as by the liturgy. They came back to Vladimir and said when they went to church they did not know whether they were still on earth or whether they had gone to heaven. Vladimir thought that sounded like a good religion to have. Thus according to that legend, he adopted Eastern Orthodoxy.

In reality, there is more to the story than that. There were missionaries going out from Constantinople. They preached the Eastern version of the Gospel, which was much like the Western versions, only with certain differences that I will describe later. The vast area of Russia and Ukraine then converted to the Orthodox faith. One Orthodox writer said, "The decision to embrace the Eastern form of Christianity determined the destiny of Russia. The whole Russian mind and heart was shaped by this Eastern Christian mold." The best way to get a feel and picture of all of that is to read the novels by Dostoevsky. In them you will see what Christianity in its Orthodox form has done to shape the Russian mind and soul.

I want to turn to describing some of the reasons that people were converting to Christianity in the medieval period. Andrew Walls has said there was a "slow, painful, and far from satisfactory spread of Christian allegiance." You should not have the idea that people became Christians and were mature, faithful Christians from the first day. You can tell by the way that I have told some of these stories that things did not happen that way.

Some people became Christians because they were forced to become Christians. There were Franks forcing Arians into Orthodoxy. There were kings and princes who made decisions that were then required to be followed by all of the people. I read one story about the conversion of the people in the Orkney Islands, which is part of modern Scotland, but was originally part of Norway. Those Scandinavian countries did eventually become Christian, although it was not through Ansgar's ministry. King Olaf of Norway, who became a Christian, wrote to Earl of Orkney, which was a vassal kingdom of Norway at that time. Olaf said, "I want you and all your subjects to be baptized. If you refuse, I will have you killed on the spot. And I swear that I will ravage every island with fire and steel." That was Olaf's evangelistic message to the Orkneys. So Earl of Orkney and all of the people of Orkney were baptized. They got the message. You can understand why that sort of conversion of an entire nation would require much work in the future. It would be necessary for those islanders to be converted again in a more serious and real way.

Some people were converted because of perceived advantages. Sometimes those advantages were spiritual. The Gospel really does meet the inner needs of human beings. People saw that and found relief from sin through conversion. Sometimes, however, they perceived that there were physical, material advantages to conversion. When Christianity was supported by the T'ang dynasty in China, it was important for people to take advantage of the status that came with being Christian in that kingdom. That was also true in places in Europe.

Sometimes people were also converted by what we now call a "power encounter." One of the real concerns that people had in the medieval period was which god they should be allied with in order to take advantage of that god's power. One wanted to be in connection with the power of an earthly lord who had strength. In spiritual matters, the same idea followed. People wanted to know which god was the strongest. Missionaries realized that people were asking that question. The question was not so much "What is true?" or "What does the Bible say?" The question was "Is this God of the Bible stronger than the gods we have been worshipping?" "Is it better to be allied with Him than these other gods?" So the Gospel was sometimes presented in the context of this power encounter.

Saint Patrick did that in Ireland, the land of the Druids. Patrick was often talking about the “strong name of the Trinity.” His message was that the trinitarian God had a name that was stronger than the pagan gods of Ireland. Saint Boniface, who went from England to Germany, found it difficult to found a Christian church in Germany until he cut down a large oak tree that was dedicated to the worship of the god Thor. It was believed that if anyone damaged that tree then terrible things would happen to that person. When Boniface found he was not making much progress, he had the idea to take an axe and cut the tree down. It was a sensational event that everyone watched while they expected him to be struck dead immediately. Yet once he cut it down, nothing happened to him, so everyone became Christian. They believed they had found a God stronger than the god Thor. I have personally seen instances of power encounters in my travels and work in Haiti. People there are concerned about the voodoo gods and whether the Christian God is superior in power and might to the gods of voodoo.

With all of those reasons for conversion to Christianity, there were obviously people who were not truly converted to real faith. The Bible says the message of the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The message was going forth. Sometimes the message was obscured, and sometimes it was not presented in the best way possible. Still there was the message that God saves sinners through Christ as we receive the gift of salvation by faith. Somehow that message was going forth. People heard it and were converted.

In all of that, God’s providence was at work. The Roman Empire was able to be used as a wonderful instrument in God’s providence. In the early church a vast area of relative peace and ease of travel allowed the Gospel to move quickly and easily from one end of the empire to another. Even the barbarian raids, which one would not normally believe God would use as missionary instruments, were part of God’s providence. The grandparents of Ulfilas were captured and taken back to the land of the Goths so that little boy was raised speaking the language of the people and knowing their culture. Patrick was captured by Irish raiders and taken back to Ireland as a slave, and God used that to bring the Gospel to Ireland. There was the Old Silk Road. People thought that it was there so that silk could go to the West, but God used it to take the Gospel to the East. As Calvinists we can say that in all of these circumstances God had His people and He used His acts of providence and the faithfulness of His missionaries to take His message to those people. The Venerable Bede, the monk who became the historian of the English church, ascribed the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria to predestination. There are some interesting stories surrounding the conversion of Northumbria that I will tell in another lesson. The Venerable Bede was making an important point in saying that in all of this God has His people.

Age number one in the history of Christianity is the period of Jewish Christianity. It was centered in Jerusalem. Christians were Jewish people. They were struggling to know whether to take the Gospel to the Gentiles or not. We know that history from the New Testament. Finally they did, and we might say it was in the nick of time, because the Jewish nation collapsed. If Christianity had been part of that, and part of that only, Christianity would have collapsed with it as it collapsed in China with the fall of the T’ang dynasty.

By the time the Jewish nation collapsed and was destroyed by the Romans, Christianity had moved across a cultural frontier and was transmitted to the Greco-Roman world. It made a home in the Roman Empire, which was age number two of Christian history. That is what I have been talking about for much of this course. Eventually the Roman Empire also collapsed. Christianity did not collapse with it, because by the time it happened Christianity had moved beyond the borders of that cultural, political entity of the Greco-Roman world, into northern Europe, temporarily into China, and it was already in Persia. Christianity had found new centers of influence in the formerly pagan countries of northern

Europe. Such movements have happened a number of times in the flow of Christian history. It is still happening today. We see the transmission of the Gospel from its more recent centers of influence in Europe and North America into the southern hemisphere in Africa and Latin America, and then Asia. It appears that those will become the next centers of the Christian faith as the old centers either fall or Christianity is lost or weakened in those old centers. Age number three of Christian history is the story of the faith in lands beyond the old Roman Empire. The remaining lessons of this course will be concerned with this third age of Christian history.

“Since we are surrounded with such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

It is important to remember that wherever Christianity goes it changes that culture. The culture is not only the secular culture, the ordinary style of peoples' lives, but also their religious culture. The other thing that happens is that the influence goes the other way, too. The culture influences Christianity. One of the places this is seen the most clearly is in early China. Confucianism mingled with Christianity and there was a certain amount of syncretism.