

# Did Rome Convert the Saxons?

## *Facts You Should Know About the History of Christianity in Britain*

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*Augustine's interview with King Ethelbert.*

It was during the period of Saxon settlement and the diversion of British missionary zeal to the Continent that the ambitious bishops of the Roman church first gave serious attention to Britain.

We have already mentioned the story of Gregory and his impulse to carry the Gospel to the pagan tribes in Britain. It is very probable, however, that he was interested still more in the independent Celtic church of which he had become well acquainted. That he intended its union and subservience to the Papal See is clearly indicated in his commission to Augustine.

"As to the bishops of the British Isles," he said, "we commit them all to you, brother, that the ignorant may be taught, the weak in the faith strengthened by your word, and the disobedient corrected by your authority."

The opportunity to enter

Britain came through contact with the Saxons of Kent. Ethelbert the king had married Bertha, the Christian daughter of King Charibert of the Franks. She took over to Kent with her a Christian bishop, and Ethelbert gave to them a ruined Brito-Christian church in Canterbury in which to worship. Gregory recognized in this union a lever which could profitably be used to extend his influence and entered into correspondence with the king. Ethelbert, on his part, no doubt welcomed the approaches of Gregory as a political move to reinforce and confirm his own usurpation. The outcome was the dispatch of Augustine with his forty monks and their landing in A.D. 597 on the Isle of Thanet at precisely the same spot where Hengist and Horsa had set their feet.

Ethelbert listened to the preaching of Augustine and on

June 2nd was baptized. Soon after the Witen or parliament officially accepted the new faith, and on Christmas Day nearly ten thousand of his subjects were immersed in the Swale, two and two performing the ordinance upon each other at Augustine's command.

### *Augustine's Methods*

The wholesale methods of Augustine are in striking contrast to the work of individual conversion carried on by the missionaries of the British church, and the Christianity he gave to the Saxons was consequently but a caricature of the true. The customs of the heathen were retained as far as possible, their significance merely being changed to Christian objects. Idol temples were purified with holy water, and dedicated as Christian churches. The heathen festivals were renamed as Christian saints' days, and the animal sacrifices were offered as before but to the true God instead of to heathen deities. This policy of compromise accounts for the occurrence of the names of Saxon deities in the names of the days of our week, Tuesco (Tuesday), Woden (Wednesday), Thor (Thursday), Frico (Friday), and in the names of some Christian festivals, as Eostre (Easter).

The little interest they took in instructing the Saxons in the truths of the Gospel is further shown by the fact that seventy years after the landing of



Augustine, not one of the Roman missionaries could speak the native language!

#### *British Church Refuses to Submit*

As soon as Augustine had firmly established himself in Kent he set about the second phase of his mission, the subjection of the native British church. Messages were dispatched to the British bishops inviting them to meet him in conference at a place in Worcester which became known in later years as Augustine's Oak.

In A.D. 603 six bishops and the abbot of Bangor under the leadership of the archbishop of Caerleon, then the principal ecclesiastical authority of the native church, met him at the appointed place. Augustine laid before them his proposal that they should acknowledge the Pope as their spiritual head and submit to him as his representative in all things. The British bishops were astounded at such a haughty demand and it was met, naturally, by a very decided refusal. They stated in their reply:

"Be it known and declared that we all, individually and collectively, are in all humility prepared to defer to the Church of God and to the Bishop of Rome, and to every sincere and godly Christian, so far as to live everyone according to his degree, in perfect charity, and to assist them all by word and in deed in being the children of God. But as for any other obedience, we know of none that he whom you term the Pope, or Bishop of Bishops, can demand. The deferences we have mentioned we are ready to pay him, as to every other Christian, but in all other respects our obedience is due to the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Caerleon, who is alone, under God, our ruler to keep us right in the way of salvation."—*Hengwrt MSS., Cottonian Library (British Museum).*

Augustine pressed his case with

entreaties and exhortations, and then with threats, but the bishops were immovable. So Augustine lowered his demands. "If you will obey me in these three things: in the time of observing Easter, in administering baptism according to the form of the Holy Roman Apostolic Church, and in preaching God's Word to the English jointly with us, all

ever, induce the submission of the British church; if anything, their resistance was intensified.

Retiring to Kent Augustine was soon superseded by Laurentius, who made another attempt to negotiate with the British and Irish bishops, but succeeded only in making the relations more bitter.

Had Gregory come over himself to England, as he had originally planned, the church might much earlier have been subdued,

but it was perhaps in the providence of God that the tactless Augustine was sent, in order that the light of the Gospel should not be entirely extinguished by Rome. For the British church had yet a great work to do.

#### *An Abortive Mission*

The Roman mission had still extended no farther than Kent and after the death of Ethelbert the church began to decline even there. A revival seemed to be coming when Ethelbert's Christian daughter married Edwin of Northumbria and with her chaplain Paulinus succeeded in winning over the Witena or parliament of Northumbria to Roman Christianity. It was, however, but short-lived, for in seeking to subdue Penda, the rebellious king of the Mercians, the champion of Christianity was slain and paganism re-asserted itself. Paulinus fled from York. Melitus was driven out of London and with Justus fled to Gaul, while Laurentius alone remained in Canterbury.

The Roman mission had woefully failed, and only among the people of Kent did it maintain a precarious existence.

#### *British Church Takes Up the Task*

Rome's failure now became Britain's opportunity. The re-  
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*Aidan preaching in Northumbria.*

your other practices we shall strive to tolerate, however contrary they be to us."

But the British bishops, incensed by his pride and arrogant assumption, replied, "We will do none of these things, neither will we have you for our archbishop."

Augustine was furious. "Since you will not have peace with brethren," he cried, "you shall have war with enemies." Not long afterwards a great massacre occurred at the college of Bangor-Iscoed in North Wales, as a result of the sudden incursion of the Northumbrians under Ethelfrid. This is alleged by Bede, the English Catholic historian, to be a fulfillment of Augustine's divinely inspired prophecy. It did not. how-



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refusal of British bishops to co-operate with the Roman mission had not been because of any neglect of mission work, for we have already seen that the propagation of the Gospel was the one great task to which the church in Britain had set itself. It was simply because they did not feel free to co-operate with a church with which they had so little in common. When, however, the emissaries of Rome left the field in despair the British church stepped into the breach and accomplished what they had failed to do.

It happened that after the death of Ethelfrid of Northumbria, a period of turmoil followed, and the king's sons found refuge in Iona. Oswald sincerely embraced Christianity and on the death of Edwin returned to Northumbria. Having recovered the throne, he immediately invited the Columbans to send a teacher to instruct his people in the faith.

The first missionary soon became discouraged by the bigoted and untractable nature of the pagans and returned.

### *Aidan, the Apostle to England*

The saintly Aidan was next dispatched together with a number of helpers. The mission settled in the island of Lindisfarne in A.D. 635, erecting there

a church and school to which the Northumbrian youth were soon attracted in large numbers. From this centre the followers of Aidan went forth from village to village and from house to house between the Humber and the Forth, preaching, teaching, and establishing churches and schools on land donated to them by the good king Oswald. Even Bede, himself a Roman Catholic, admits that by Aidan and his successors "was all northern England recovered from paganism."

From the school at Lindisfarne missionaries also went out to other sections of England to spread the Gospel of Christ. Cedd went with three followers to Mid-Anglia, and later led a mission to the East Saxons, over whom he was consecrated bishop by Finan thirty-eight years after the expulsion of the previous Roman bishop, Mellitus. Another scholar, Chad or Æadda, became the apostle to the Mercians of the Midlands, who had hitherto withstood all attempts at conversion.

Hilda, the grandniece of Edwin, had been baptized with him at the age of thirteen, and when Christianity was re-organized in Northumbria was instructed by Aidan. From Lindisfarne she went to Whitby, where she organized a monastery, whence there went forth the principal clergy and bishops of the province of York. She also instructed Caedmon, the first poet and paraphraser of Scripture in the Saxon tongue.

Aidan and his followers were supported in their efforts by other missionaries from Ireland. Diuma and Ceollach went to the Mercians, Fursa went to the East Anglians of Suffolk, and another Irish missionary went among the pagan South Saxons of Sussex, the last mentioned,

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however, not having much success.

Thus by about A.D. 660 the whole of Saxon England, except Sussex, had been united with the fold of Christ. But the work had been accomplished by the missionaries of the British and Irish churches and not by those of Rome. Actually outside Canterbury there was only one bishop of the Roman communion in England, namely Wina of Winchester, and he later deserted his party or was deposed.

We may, therefore, very truthfully say with Bishop Lightfoot, that, "Not Augustine but Aidan is the true apostle of England."

*(Next Time: "How Britain Preserved the Ancient Faith.")*

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