

Gregory the Great's Missionary Example: The Roman Mission to England

Pope Gregory the Great was one of the most outstanding men ever to sit on the papal throne. Within his fourteen-year tenure (590-604 A.D.), he produced a great amount of work and achievement. His list of responsibilities was long, ranging from feeding the poor of Rome, to managing the large land holdings of the Church, to repairing and maintaining the infrastructure of the city, to protecting the city from foreign invaders, to reforming the abuses in the church, to the everyday duties bestowed on a bishop of any city — all while his frail health was under constant attack from fever, indigestion, and gout. But, not only did Gregory manage to adeptly perform his duties, he also was able to see beyond them, to care for another land where the nation as a whole knew little of the name of Jesus. In this respect, Gregory was a visionary, and near the end of the sixth century, his sights landed on bringing the message of Good News to the peoples of the Angli.

Rarely is a Pope found at the forefront of a missions venture. But without Gregory the Great, the Roman mission to England could have been delayed for centuries. Addison summarized it well:

In this notable case Pope Gregory I conceived the plan, appointed the workers from his own monastery, launched them on their journey, and subsequently kept in close touch with their activities and supplied their leader with specific instructions. Furthermore, 'it was a new experiment which the Pope was making.' This was the first missionary enterprise on

a concerted plan, sent out by the head of the Western Church to evangelize the nation.’¹

His example and vision transformed a nation for Christendom, which would in turn touch other nations with the same faith, which would eventually reach much of the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gregory’s early life

Around 540, Gregory was born into a prominent Roman family. His family was extremely devout: one of his ancestors had held the papal office, two of his aunts had taken a vow of celibacy and had later been canonized as saints, and after his father’s death, his mother had joined a monastery and was enrolled as a saint. Gregory himself received a solid education in Rome, probably one of the finest he could have received in that day. Later, his exceptional abilities in administration caught the Emperor’s attention, and he was appointed as head of the civil administration of the city.

Through much of his life, Gregory was undoubtedly attracted to the monastic way of life. Whether he technically became a monk is under debate, but he embraced the lifestyle of a monk and led an ascetic life. Richards asserts, “He was the legislator, the popularizer, and the champion of monasticism in all its forms, regarding it as the most perfect expression on earth of man’s search for God.”² When his father’s death brought Gregory great wealth, he used it to found six monasteries on Sicily — even turning his own ancestral home into a monastery which he named St. Andrew. He gave the rest of his wealth to the poor. Addison says,

¹ J. T. Addison, *The Medieval Missionary: A Study on the Conversion of Northern Europe, AD 500-1300* (1936), p. 107, italics mine.

² J. Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (1980), p. 255.

...although not technically a monk, [Gregory] was a very ideal monk in his heart and aspirations... He idealized the monkish life and monkish standards... With this ideal of life, he was the first churchman of great parts who deliberately placed the monk's role and career above that of his secular brethren.³

By 586, he had served six years as a Papal representative in Constantinople, and had returned to Rome to become the secretary to the Pope. Four years later, the death of his superior Pelagius II created a vacant position at the head of the Western church. Popular acclaim and the support of the clergy swept him into papal office, though he was reluctant to accept the position. However, he continued to prove that he was a very able administrator, and excelled beyond expectations in the tumultuous times of late sixth-century Rome.

Gregory's inspiration for the mission

According to tradition, Gregory, before his papacy, met some Angle slaves in the Forum who inspired him to reach the land of the Angli for the Gospel. Richards quotes this account from the *Whitby Life*, which can also be found in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*:

There is a story told by the faithful that, before he became pope, there came to Rome certain people of our nation, fair-skinned and light-haired. When he heard of their arrival he was eager to see them; being prompted by a fortunate intuition, being puzzled by their new and unusual appearance, and, above all, being inspired by God, he received them and asked what race they belonged to. (Now some say they were beautiful boys, while others say that they were curly-haired, handsome youths.) They answered, 'The people we belong to are called Angles.' 'Angels of God,' he replied. Then he asked further, 'What is the name of the king of that people?' They said, 'Aelli' whereupon he said: 'Alleluia, God's praise must be heard there.' Then he asked the name of their own tribe, to which they answered 'Deira' and he replied, 'They shall flee from the wrath of God to the faith.'⁴

³ Addison, p. 81, quoted from H. H. Howorth, *St. Augustine of Canterbury* (1913), p. x.

⁴ Richards, p.p. 238-239, quoted from *Whitby Life of Gregory the Great*, ed. B. Colgrave, 1968.

And after this encounter, Gregory asked the Pope for permission to go to England to evangelize the land of the Angli. According to the story, the Pope was willing, but the public would not allow Gregory to leave the city, and he therefore remained in Rome.

Whether this event actually occurred is a matter of scholastic debate. Since Bede attributes this story to oral tradition, he admitted that he had no historical evidence to support it. Therefore, some critics assert that the earliest recorded encounter between Gregory and the Angles is pontiff's known purchase of Saxon slaves in 595.

However, Richards has another theory. First, the anonymous of Whitby had access to sources which Bede did not, drawing from a separate Roman tradition and yet still supporting Bede's story.⁵ Second, an active slave trade flourished during that time between Britain and Gaul, and between Gaul and Italy, which would make the presence of English slaves in Rome unsurprising. Third, King Aella reigned before Gregory's election, in 560-588. Therefore, the case is strong that Gregory's meeting with the English slaves actually occurred in history.

In fact, Richards suggests that the purchase of the Saxon slaves in 595 and the sending of the mission in the following year is part of one plan, citing that the tone of Gregory's letter to Queen Brunhild suggests that his missionary plans were an immediate response to his learning of the affairs of state in England.

Gregory's motives for the mission

Missionary activities were of the utmost importance to the pontiff, and he made it one of his primary activities. Some have asserted that Gregory wanted to beat the Irish and the Welsh to the conversion of the English, but this position is supported by little substantial evidence.

⁵ Richards, p. 239.

Richards insists that the Pope knew nothing of the competing church's activities.⁶ Richards also opposes the idea that the Pope merely wanted to extend papal jurisdiction into new lands, because his letters pointed more toward the moral issues than the jurisdictional aspects of the mission.⁷ Gregory himself writes:

*... it has come to our knowledge how that the nation of Angli, by God's permission, is desirous of becoming Christian, but that the priests who are in their neighbourhood have no pastoral solicitude with regard to them. And lest their souls should haply perish in eternal damnation, it has been our care to send to them the bearer of these presents, Augustine the servant of God...*⁸

Gregory's desire to send people to England was purely pastoral, and his heart truly cared for the lost of England.

Gregory's sending of the mission

Religion in England at this time was failing. Though a former province of the Roman Empire, it had been invaded and overrun by Germanic tribes -- mainly Angles and Saxons -- 150 years prior to the mission, and they had settled on the eastern parts of England. In the northern parts, Christianity was not known. Finally, the descendants of the Roman provincials, who were Christians, had been beaten off by the invaders to the western portion of the great island. Selfishly, the clergy of western Britain did not wish to minister to their enemies to the east, which incited Gregory's disapproval, and strengthened his resolve to send missionaries to England.⁹

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁸ P. Schaff and H. Wace, Eds., "Epistle LIX: To Brunichild, Queen of the Franks," *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Second Series. Vol. XII. Translated by James Barmby, 1952, p. 205-206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

It seems that the missionaries' path was prepared even before they landed in England. King Ethelbert of Kent was the most powerful ruler of the island, acknowledged as such by his other fellow rulers. His kingdom faced the English Channel, and his inevitable contacts with the Franks resulted in his marriage to Bertha, the Christian daughter of King Charibert of Paris. As part of their wedding agreement, Bertha was allowed to retain her faith, and to bring with her a Frankish bishop, Luihard, who is credited with sowing the seeds of Christianity among the royal court before Augustine's arrival.¹⁰ The time was ripe for the conversion of the nation of Angli.

In 596, Gregory initiated his plans. To head the mission, he selected Augustine, a prior from his own monastery of St. Andrew, and chose 40 more monks to go with him. It is not merely coincidental that Gregory, in the first concerted effort by the Church to preach to a pagan nation, would send monastic brethren from Rome to preach in England. First, they would propagate his notion of ideal Christianity, by articulating and living out their faith credibly through a community on foreign soil. Second, their austere and disciplined lifestyle prepared them for a pioneer's lifestyle in a pagan land. To Gregory's mind, they must have been the perfect candidates for the missions field.

Unfortunately, the first party was sent with little preparation. None of the brethren knew the native language of the Angli, and they took with them no interpreters. They had no commendatory letters from the pontiff to assure them assistance along the way. By the time they reached Aix in Gaul, the stories of English savagery struck them with "craven terror,"¹¹ and they knew that they would be unable to comprehend the language. The party was disheartened, and Augustine was sent back to Rome to beg for the mission's termination.

¹⁰ Richards, p. 242.

¹¹ Bede, the Venerable, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, revised, translated, and edited by A. M. Sellar, 1907, p. 43.

Gregory was not to be deterred. He insisted that Augustine return to the mission, and this time, learning from his mistakes, he prepared him much more thoroughly. He sent with Augustine a letter of encouragement to the rest of the entourage, expressing his heart by saying “that so, even though I cannot labour with you, I may be found together with you in the joy of the reward; for in truth I desire to labour.”¹² He also appointed Augustine as their abbot, and suggested that they take Frankish interpreters to facilitate their communication with the natives. Finally, he sent letters to bishops in Gaul and Arles, through whose territories the missionaries would travel, entreating the bishops to give aid to Augustine and his party. Had the Pope relinquished his vision, the missions journey to England would have died. But, Gregory was determined to see the missionary party reach England, and as far as humanly possible, he worked to ensure their success.

When they landed on the Island of Thanet in the spring of 597, they sent the king a message, telling him that they had a joyful message to share. King Ethelbert of Kent provided them with necessities, while he decided on what to do with the missionaries.

Bede gives this account of their arrival:

Some days after, the king came into the island, and sitting in the open air, ordered Augustine and his companions to come and hold a conference with him. For he had taken precaution that they should not come to him in any house, lest, by so coming, according to an ancient superstition, if they practised any magical arts, they might impose upon him, and so get the better of him. But they came endued with Divine, not with magic power, bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board; and chanting litanies, they offered up their prayers to the Lord for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom and for whom they had come.¹³

Wisely, the King answered their message of greeting in this way:

¹² P. Schaff, “Epistle LI: To the Brethren Going to England,” p. 203.

¹³ Bede, p. 46.

*Your words and promises are fair, but because they are new to us, and of uncertain import, I cannot consent to them so far as to forsake that which I have so long observed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from far as strangers into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true, and most beneficial, we desire not to harm you, but will give you favourable entertainment, and take care to supply you with all things necessary to your sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion.*¹⁴

The king fulfilled his promises and provided them lodging in Canterbury, the metropolis of all his dominions. With the religious freedom granted them, the missionaries started a monastic community, and began preaching and holding services in the church of St. Martin, a renovated Roman building used by the Queen.

The work proceeded quickly, and by Christmas Day, 597, the King and 10,000 of his people were baptized into the Christian faith. With the news of this great success, Augustine sent the priest Laurentius and the monk Peter to Rome to update Gregory on the progress of the work. He also sent with them many questions about ecclesiastical conduct for the new church. The correspondence between Augustine and Gregory played an integral role in linking the new church of England under the supervision of Rome.

Replying years later in 601, possibly delaying due to health problems,¹⁵ Gregory sent a fresh supply of missionary monks under the Gallic abbot Mellitus, and also sent sacred objects used in the worship, as well as a sheaf of letters which answered his questions and officially granted Augustine the pallium, making him archbishop of the English, and the first Bishop of Canterbury. It is through these letters that Augustine explained his strategy for the English church, which will be discussed later.

With the support of the King, Augustine renovated Roman churches in Britain, one of which became the Canterbury cathedral. Then, after a faulty attempt to bring the Welsh

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁵ Richards, p. 243.

bishops under Rome's authority, Augustine and the Roman missionaries continued the work without them. Augustine died around 605, and though the English church would suffer from many evils in its future, he made a breakthrough into the country for the sake of Catholic Christianity. His breakthrough would not be severed until the 16th century, and according to Latourette, even then it was not severed completely.¹⁶

Through the Pope's strenuous activity and participation in the Roman Mission to England, the Catholic church was able to bring the English church into close fellowship and giving to this church its organization. Moreover, the English were later used to spread Christianity back to the continent, sparking a building of faith for the Germans and the Carolingian realms. Finally, in recent centuries, British Christianity has been carried to much of the world.¹⁷ The spark that began with a vision of a pontiff — through the grace of God and the work of other believers in Christian history — would have a profound impact on Christianity throughout the rest of history.

Gregory's strategies and correspondences

Through his correspondences with missionaries, Gregory's strategy with regard to England was clear. Gregory wanted conversion to occur by encouragement and conciliation, working with the lay authorities.¹⁸ Gregory wrote to the Archbishop Leander of Seville in Spain, "As long as there is unity in the faith, difference in custom is not prejudicial to the Holy Church."¹⁹ In the same manner, he exhorted Augustine to adapt the church's rituals to local circumstances:

¹⁶ K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. I: to A.D. 500* (1953), p. 346

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁸ Richards, p. 244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Thy Fraternity knows the use of the Roman Church, in which thou hast been nurtured. But I approve of thy selecting carefully anything thou hast found that may be more pleasing to Almighty God, whether in the Roman Church or that of Gaul, or in any Church whatever, and introducing in the Church of Angli, which is as yet new in the faith, by a special institution, what thou hast been able to collect from many Churches. For we ought not love things for places, but places for things. Therefore choose from each several Church such things as are pious, religious, and right, and, collecting them as it were into a bundle, plant them in the minds of the Angli for their use.²⁰

With his strategy of persuasion, he came, after an initially aggressive stance, to eschew force. In one instance, Gregory felt disturbed after writing a letter to King Ethelbert to destroy idols and temples. Through a second group of letters sent to Mellitus, he wrote that the temples should not be destroyed, but if they were in satisfactory condition be rather transformed into churches to worship the true God.²¹

He also provided suggestions on the organization of the new church. Gregory exhorted Augustine to establish a metropolitan see in London, and ordain 12 bishoprics under its jurisdiction. Then, he was to create another metropolitan archbishopric in York, which would ordain 12 more bishops under its see. But these suggestions showed that Gregory had in mind the geography of the former Roman province of Britain instead of the new arrangement of the English kingdoms.²² Augustine, therefore, remained at Canterbury and made little attempt to implement the plan.

In fact, it seems that the papal office supported Augustine's move — at least, condoned it — because even to this day, his decisions about the ecclesiastical organization of England have remained unchallenged; Canterbury and York are still the two metropolitans of the Church of England. It seems that Gregory and his predecessors

²⁰ P. Schaff, "Epistle LXIV: To Augustine, Bishop of the Angli," Vol. XIII, p. 75.

²¹ Richards, p. 245.

²² *Ibid.*, p.243.

acknowledged Augustine's superiority of knowledge about England, and allowed Augustine's decision to stand.

In fact, Gregory's acceptance of Augustine's actions is in complete accord with his own missions strategy. As we have seen, he had pushed Augustine to contextualize Christian rituals to make them relevant to the minds of the Angli. Thus, Augustine's decision to remain in Canterbury is a better choice given the context of the land, since it lies at the heart of the kingdom of King Ethelbert, the most powerful ruler on the island. Given his own missions strategy, it seems natural that Gregory would have preferred Augustine's choice of metropolitan sees, had he better understood English geography, as Augustine did.

Augustine also asked Gregory many more questions about how to administer the church on subjects ranging from appropriations of the church budget, to the conduct of clerics, to the punishment for theft in the church, to the approval of certain marriages, to the ordination of bishops. To these questions, Gregory faithfully replied, and maintained the link between the Church of England and Rome.

Conclusions

Overall, Christians today can find lessons for missionary strategy in Gregory and his concerted plan to reach the English. As stated before, Gregory felt that his missionary duties were of primary importance to the papal office. He had a true heart for the lost; he wanted to go to England himself. But, using today's Christian vernacular, he was "called to stay" in Rome, though his heart desired to go. So, while in Rome, he devoted much to effort to support the plans to win the souls in England for Jesus. Even though the demands of his responsibilities could have easily eaten away his time and energy, he was able to see beyond

the ecclesiastical structures of the day, to see what laid ahead in the land of the pagan. He was, in the truest sense, a visionary.

Clearly, his visions led to action. Without Gregory, the Roman Mission to England would have failed. As it was, however, Augustine had the backing of the most influential man of the Western Church, and under his authority and the authority of God, he was able to transform a nation for the kingdom of Christ. Gregory initiated the mission, planned it, executed it, sustained it, and supported it by garnering support from other Christian leaders. With this strategy, Augustine could more easily focus on preaching the Word of God.

Also, Gregory showed great wisdom and insight in his management of the mission. He and Augustine kept close contact with each other; they worked as a team. Through their correspondences, he exhorted Augustine to contextualize Catholic rituals, making the faith as relevant as possible to the nation of Angli. In this, he showed that he cared more for the heart of the religion than for its strict ritual, and removed as many barriers from the Gospel as he could. And, though Gregory gave some advice to the ecclesiastical structure of England, Augustine was not condemned for his adaptation of Gregory's organizational strategies to better fit the land, knowing that a metropolitan see located at Canterbury would yield greater benefits than one in London. Throughout the missionary expedition, Augustine had Gregory's full support in his ministry to the English.

Today, the leaders of the local church need to catch a vision for the people of the world who do not believe in the name of Jesus. Though this is the greatest age for missionary activity we have ever witnessed, still many Christians — and especially our leaders — fail to see the need to bring Christ to the lost nations of the world. Not only do our leaders need to have a heart for the lost, but also they must work hard to support the missionaries that do go abroad. Gregory did this, and God worked mightily through his

efforts. Whether we are called to stay or go, Gregory's example teaches us that we should have compassion for the lost in all parts of the world, and do whatever is necessary to bring to them the name of Jesus.

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