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The Age of Missions 600-900 AD

The Barbarian Hordes

"If you can't beat 'em, let 'em join the club!"

With power and organization reverting to the church in the western world, it is easiest to understand the period from 600 to 900 as a jockeying for control by numerous competing kingdoms.

The importance of this period is not so much in the struggle for power that dominated the period, but in the resolution to the struggle that the church fell upon: missions. If this age is to be known for any single contribution to history it must be that it was the finest Age of Missions we've ever known. The seeds planted by previous generations of missionaries in the period from 300 to 600 were now reaching fruition in the work of individual men under the power of God's Spirit, and we'll look at the lives of a few of these giants shortly. Yet we see in the church's desire for unity, dominance and organization a corresponding manipulation of the missionary arm of the church to overcome the enemy from within, to make missions the instrument of church consolidation and control. There were two totally different perspectives at work here. The individual missionaries perceived their role as agents of Jesus Christ bringing hope and life to a dying world. The church hierarchy, however, perceived the role of the missionary as an extension of the papal throne, a means to promote papal and/or imperial influence around the world. In a period of world-wide chaos and instability, both perspectives had their value.

This period also saw the rise of the Islamic Empire, which took its own missionary zeal for Mohammed to the world by the use of a sword. That characterized the Christian response as well, for this was the age of the crusades, a passionate and bloody exercise in carnal evangelism. It is the age of Feudalism in which land is the source of power and wealth. The Arian Ostrogoths too saw their mission in life as a Christian one: to bring to the world the salvation of Christian order and authority, if not the salvation of the souls of those they conquered. Charlemagne came to power in the late 8th century using the power of his armies to subjugate and proselytize the Saxons for the glory of Pope Leo III and the church. Under Charlemagne, the state regained its dominance over the church for a time, through a kind of mutual admiration society, armed protection for official sanction.

Charlemagne

Charles did not come to power overnight, nor was he without mighty predecessors who paved the way for a unified Europe. Clovis was the first real king of the Merovingian line of Germanic rulers in Gaul and ruled from 481 to 511. Though pagans, both Clovis and his father maintained good relations with the bishops of Gaul. In 493 Clovis married Clotilda, a Catholic Burgundian princess. The first child was baptized and died. Clovis blamed the baptism. The second child was baptized and became ill, but Clotilda prayed for him and he recovered. Clovis

feared baptism would be the death of him.¹ After calling upon Christ and receiving a significant victory over the Alemanni however, he and 3000 soldiers were baptized into the Catholic faith on Christmas day in 496. He became the protector of the church in Gaul and founded many churches and monasteries there.²

What is significant in this "mass conversion" approach to evangelism is that it was the primary means of conversion during this period, and it resulted in the paganizing of Christianity. The lesson to be learned is that one-on-one conversion is not only the Biblical norm, it is the only norm. It is one in which the individual is confronted with his own personal sin, his own personal need for Christ, and his own personal confession of faith. While mass conversions helped to knit Christianity into the social fabric of Europe, they did nothing to build up the spiritual fabric of Europe's people.

The matter of which faith, Catholic or Arian, had been settled by Clovis' decision. The only issue remaining was what to do with the remaining pagans of the realm. At the Synod of Whitby in 664, the English too had come into Rome's orbit. The Celtic king had been confronted with Peter's possession of the keys to heaven and rather than take a chance, he sided with Roman Catholicism against the Arians. The Irish began sending missionaries to the Saxons and to Scandinavia as more and more of western Europe became catholicized. But the Saxons were holding on to their pagan ways.

In 714, Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel (also affectionately known as the "Hammer"), became Mayor of the Palace, the seat of true power in the Merovingian kingdom. He defeated an army of Moslem invaders from North Africa in 732 at the battle of Tours and sent them running into Spain, ending their threat to the Frankish kingdom permanently. Charles Martel's son, Pepin became successor to his father's chair.

In 751 Pepin III (Pippin), the Short came to power as the first Carolingian king of the Franks. He was coronated by the great English missionary to the Germans, Boniface (whom we will look at shortly), thus securing papal recognition. In 754 he was again crowned by Pope Stephen III as patrician of the Romans. With this sanctioning by the Pope of the reign of a king, the cementing of an ominous relationship was taking place between church and state. Pepin gave vast estates to the church from the territories secured from the Lombards, and over which the Pope would have POLITICAL sovereignty. These are collectively known as the Patrimony of St. Peter.³ Pepin's reign ended in 768 and was eventually transferred to his son, Charles the Great. When the Lombards attempted to regain their territories from the Pope, Charles defeated them in 774, affirmed the donation of Pippin and proclaimed himself king of the Lombards. He then donated even more lands to the church.

In 799 Pope Leo III was leading a procession through the streets of Rome when an armed band kidnapped him on behalf of the previous pope, Adrian I. Perjury and adultery were the charges levelled against Leo. Leo's supporters managed to rescue him, but as fighting continued in the streets, Leo realized he would need a strong protector. He called upon Charles the Great,

¹ Bromiley, Geoffrey *Historical Theology* (Eerdmans, GrandRapids, 1978), p. 175.

² Moyer, Elgin S. *The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church* (Moody Press, Chicago, 1981), p. 95.

³ *Ibid.* 320-321

king of the Franks. The next year, 800, Charles crossed the Alps with an army to settle the issue once and for all. In December, Charles presided over a meeting of bishops, nobles, diplomats, members of the royal household, and rebels.

On December 23, the Pope absolved himself of all guilt in the matter, and on Christmas day Leo III placed a golden crown on Charles' head as the congregation cried: "To Charles, the most pious, crowned Augustus by God, to the great peace-making Emperor, long life and victory." Charles liked the title. In fact he signed all his dispatches, "Charles, by the will of God, Roman Emperor Augustus." Even Constantinople recognized him in 812, after some fast footwork to soothe the Eastern emperor who disliked Charles' title.

With Charles we finally see the grafting together of church and state, and some semblance of political unity in Europe. Charles drove the Muslims down to Barcelona. He conquered the Bavarians and Saxons and then, to maintain the victory, he divided Saxony into bishoprics, built monasteries, and proclaimed harsh laws against paganism. Eating meat during Lent, cremating the dead, and pretending to be baptized were offenses punishable by death. Charles then turned east and soundly defeated the Avars and the Slavs pushing them past the Danube in present day Austria.

Charles' contributions were many. He enhances civil rule, and gave both power and prestige to the church. He encouraged education and called into public service eminent scholars, poets, and historians from Britain and Italy. He used ecclesiastics as counselors. He attended church, encouraged his subjects to attend, and gave tithes to support the church (requiring his subjects to do likewise). He encouraged preaching and sermon writing. He opposed image worship (the Iconoclast Controversy) even against the decision of the Second Council of Nicea. His doctrine included upholding the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (an orthodox statement of today). On the other hand he was a cruel despot to the Saxons, and he married several women and divorced them at his whim.⁴

When Charles died, the kingdom disintegrated into a series of civil wars, and new invasions began immediately.⁵ Feudalism arrived as the only means of defense against the invaders. Church officials were forced into close ties with the feudal barons of France and the kings of Germany. Bishops and abbots became "vassals" receiving fiefs for which they were obligated to provide the usual feudal services. For the next 200 years the Pope was not in a position to challenge or order anyone. The only respite in the period was the relative peace brought by Otto the Great of Germany who restored the Roman Empire in the West in 962.⁶

The Missionaries

Willibrord, missionary to the Netherlands and teacher of Boniface. He was born in Northumberland, England of devout Christian parents, reared in the Celtic church, and educated at the monastery at Ripon. He continued his education in Ireland. In 690 he embarked from England for Frisia with eleven companions and landed at the mouth of the Rhine in present-day

⁴ Ibid. Moyer, 85-86.

⁵ Ibid. Bromiley, 191-196.

⁶ Ibid. Bromiley, 198-199.

Holland. In 695 he went to Rome to receive archiepiscopal consecration. Willibrord established the headquarters of his archbishopric at Utrecht, where he labored for nearly 45 years, three of them with Boniface as his assistant.

Winfrid, also known as **Boniface** "Doer of Good." Boniface was the product of the Benedictine monastic movement, born in Devonshire, England and commissioned by Pope Gregory II in 729 to evangelize Germany. While doing so, he was also able to bring the missionaries of Ireland and England into a closer relationship with Rome. Boniface was not a novice at missionary work. He was ordained at age 30 and in 716 sailed with a few friends to Frisia (present-day Netherlands) to help Willibrord. With strong opposition from the local Frisian king, Boniface abandoned his mission call and returned to Rome from 718-719. He began a work in Thuringia, but when he heard that the Frisian king had died, he returned to Frisia to help the great missionary Willibrord for three years until 722. He then moved on to Thuringia to begin his life's work. He spent 10 highly successful years there.

The then-inhabitants of Germany (Thuringia) were worshippers of nature spirits with animal sacrifices. Boniface marched into a shrine in the sacred forest of Thor, the thunder god. The cult object was a massive oak. Boniface took an ax to it and just as he levelled the first stroke, a mighty wind toppled the tree. The pagans immediately converted to Christianity. Boniface used the wood to build a chapel to St. Peter.

Boniface organized the masses he converted into districts so they would leave a church structure behind him, firmly bound to the central authority at Rome. In 732 he became an archbishop with authority to establish new sees in Germany. In 739 Boniface was made a apostolic vicar or Papal legate carrying with him all the power and authority of the Pope. In 742 he organized the church in Bavaria and Germany and established the important and influential monastery at Fulda in 744. He assembled the first German council, organized churches, schools and monasteries in the Roman fashion, and trained and sent missionaries from the German churches. It was the work of Boniface, more than anyone else, that created the foundation for the medieval papacy. In 746 Boniface became Archbishop of Mainz and worked among the Franks trying to reform it.

But troubled by his early failure at Frisia, Boniface returned there in 753 with a company of monks and priests. For two years he traveled among them, preaching, baptizing thousands of converts, destroying pagan temples, and building churches. In 755 group of pagan hostiles sealed his faith as a martyr, dying with the Gospel in his hands. Charlemagne was 12 years old at the time.⁷

Anskar, "Apostle to the North," was born of Frankish parents in northwestern France. He became a Benedictine monk and was educated at the famous monastery of Corbie. He was called to a missionary work by the Christian king and queen of Denmark. He built a mission and a boys school in Schleswig, but when the king became unpopular two years later, Anskar had to flee Denmark. He then spent two years in Sweden. When a new king came to the throne in Denmark, Anskar was called back. In 829, the first bishopric was established at Hamburg for all of the northern country, and Anskar was consecrated its first bishop. Later, when Bremen and Hamburg

⁷ Ibid. Moyer, pp. 50-51.

united, Anskar was made archbishop. He then returned to Rome to receive papal consecration and a papal commission as legate to the Swedes, Danes, Slavs and other races of the north. While he laid the foundations for Christianity in those countries, they were not won for another 150 years.

Cyril and Methodius (brothers), missionaries to the Slavs by invitation of Duke Ratislav of Moravia in 862, and by commission of emperor Michael III. Cyril invented an alphabet (still the alphabet of Russia) and translated the Bible into the Slavic language. In 868 the brothers went to Rome to obtain official sanction for the use of the Slavic language, thus bringing their work under the supervision of the Roman church. Cyril died at Rome in 869 and Methodius returned to Moravia as archbishop.

Wilfrid, bishop of Northumbria in England and abbot of the monastery at Ripon where Willibrord had been educated. In 863 he became the driving force behind the adoption of the Roman catholic form of the faith (as opposed to the Celtic aberrations) at the Synod of Whitby.

Conclusion –

In the lives of these missionaries, we see an obvious trend toward the consolidation and subjugation of the European churches to the authority of the Roman papacy. This was a continuation of the work of Pope Gregory the Great. The Roman church became unified by the network of monasteries that were established throughout Europe. This pattern continued for the rest of the medieval period. It was spurred on by the desire for another Rome, a united empire, and the spiritual conviction of a handful of men who devoted themselves to the preaching and teaching of God's Holy Word.