

AIDAN OF LINDISFARNE

Apostle to the English

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As early as the 3rd century Christian churches had been established in Britain but their numbers were few and their influence sparse. Invasions of the Angles and Saxons rendered the Christian population feeble, and by the 5th century only a remote and precarious group remained in Wales. The hatred of the invaders themselves was such that Britons likely felt it was almost impossible and certainly undesirable to convert them. With pagans on all sides, the British Christian population was destined to shrink in some measure.¹

Pope Gregory the Great in 596 A.D. responded by initiating the mission to England that would revitalize the Christian world in Northumbria and lead to a substantial increase in Christianity for centuries to come. He dispatched Augustine (who would later become the first bishop of Canterbury) and his cloister of monks to preach the gospel to England, and kept a close connection with their labors through detailed correspondence. Historian Stephen Neill remarked that Gregory's action was "fresh and remarkable," since the first churches had generally grown haphazardly. "[This] was almost the first example since the days of Paul of a carefully planned and calculated mission." Augustine's first stop was to King Ethelbert of Kent who had already wedded Bertha, a Christian princess from Gaul. Ethelbert was at first anxious, fearing that these missionaries might, through "skillful sorcery," deceive him. But with images of Jesus Christ and the Cross, and after virtuous living and preaching, Augustine and his companions succeeded in making an impact on the king. By the end of the year they baptized Ethelbert and some 10,000 Saxons.²

Later, Augustine's ministry would become what many consider the beginnings of Anglicanism, which (as of 2006) claims over 80 million adherents, one of the world's largest Christian denominations.³ The religious power of the British Empire in the centuries that followed, the colonization of America, and the rise of American Protestantism all relate to the Church of Eng-

land itself, suggesting significant modern consequences of this period of monastic proselytizing activities. As singular, though, as was this mission of Augustine of Canterbury, the greater impact on the growth of British Christianity throughout the Middle Ages resulted from groups of Irish monks networking their proselytizing efforts through elaborate training systems, engaging in effective diplomacy with royal authorities, and ministering zealously to remote areas. Possibly the most notable British historian of this time was “the father of English history,” Bede of Wearmouth, who commented extensively on the effect of these Irish missionaries. Henry Mayr-Harting expressed,

One of the major puzzles of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* is that when one puts it down after reading the first three books one realizes that though Bede was a supporter of the Roman Church order it is the Irish missionaries who have made the overwhelming impact.... The pages about the Romans, who should have been his heroes, rather limp along, while the pages about the Irish or Irish-trained monks ... are full of life and attractive information.⁴

Arguably Bede’s favorite of the Irish missionaries, one whose influence shaped the missiological attitudes and ministries of succeeding bishoprics, and whose ministry has been overlooked in the wake of “the miracle at Canterbury” was Aidan of Lindisfarne, “the apostle” of Northumbria.

Iona, Columba, and Oswald

Described as a man of “outstanding gentleness, devotion, and moderation,” Aidan followed the monastic order in Ireland, possibly the county of Connacht, and attended St. Columba’s famous monastery at Iona until 635 when he assumed the bishopric in Lindisfarne.⁵ The Ionan monastery housed at the time of Columba’s death (in around 597) about one hundred and fifty monks who worked with “copying manuscripts, offering pastoral care and spiritual leadership, founding and running monastic communities and playing a high-profile role in the dynastic disputes and political rivalries of Irish and British kings and chieftains,” which duties would have cer-

tainly been a part of Aidan's ecclesiastical upbringing.⁶ Irish monasticism, a unique order in its own right, had roots in St. Patrick of the 5th century. This ascetic tradition begun with Patrick was extreme: monks lived in severely poor "beehive" dwellings in the Skelligs off the coast of Cork, some would recite the whole Psalter while plunged in icy water, and others would stand so long in prayer with their arms crossed that birds had time to build nests in their hair. Missionary passion developed from these ascetics, typically with heavy fervor to convert the pagans, which culminated in Columba's new evangelistic order of monasteries of which Aidan was a part. Whether Aidan knew Columba personally or not, clearly Columba's drive for reaching non-Christians influenced Aidan's own ministry.

In 563, after having already founded two monasteries, Columba decided to cross the narrow seas with twelve companions and found a new monastery on the island of Hy or Iona. While Columba was not entirely the pioneer of Scottish missionary work (St Ninian in the late 4th century had already worked the south of Galloway, for example), he certainly made a revolutionary impact on the "wild and pagan" greater part of Scotland.⁷ The purpose of this monastery was different from all others: the gospel was to be preached to the still heathen Picts, and monks therein would be trained up in the capacity of converting them. In his lifetime, Columba had effectively founded a number of monasteries which all remained under the control of the central foundation at Iona, a first in the revitalized effort to establish missions. Indeed, Columba was instrumental in building the Church in Scotland, but some have speculated that his prominence in Christian history is a bit exaggerated. Whatever the case, clearly there went from Columba's group of missionaries a movement that "carried the influence of that center beyond both the Scots and the Picts."⁸ After Columba's death, the work from Iona received its greatest extension in the work of Aidan and the reign of King Oswald of Northumbria.

Oswald, like Constantine and Clovis before him, decided in time of battle to become a Christian. On the morning of battle, he had a cross erected, knelt before it, and asked aid for himself and his army, promising as well to his soldiers that God would deliver them and smite the enemy.⁹ That day in 633, Oswald's army defeated Caedwalla at Heavenfield in a decisive manner, a confirming witness to Oswald of his faith in Christ.¹⁰

As has already been noted, Christianity had been first introduced into Northumbria by Rome under the direction of Pope Gregory I. But overall conversion of Northumbrians was far from complete and the people had likely relapsed into pagan worship before Oswald's conversion. Thus, to Iona Oswald appealed, asking for a bishop to be sent for the instructing of his people in the "tenets of the religion whose power had been so signally attested."¹¹ A monk named Corman was sent to "minister the word of faith" to the Northumbrians, but he eventually proved to be lacking in experience and had only a short stint before returning, declaring his flock as "intractable ... uncivilized men, and of a stubborn and barbarous disposition."¹²

Aidan arrives at Lindisfarne

Upon hearing of Corman's resignation of proselytizing among the Northumbrian royalty, a council was convened to debate what was to be done, "being desirous that the nation should receive the salvation it demanded, and grieving that they had not received the preacher sent to them." Aidan was present in the council and reportedly said to Corman,

I am of opinion, brother, that you were more severe to your unlearned hearers than you ought to have been and did not at first, conformably to the apostolic rule, give them the milk of more easy doctrine, till being by degrees nourished with the word of God, they should be capable of greater perfection, and be able to practice God's sublimer precepts.

All those present in the council unanimously concluded that Aidan “deserved to be made a bishop” and that he possessed all the necessary virtues to be sent “to the incredulous and unlearned,” the chief of his virtues being “the discretion for which he was before remarkable.”¹³

Aidan left for Oswald’s court and was granted by the king the island of Lindisfarne, near the modern-day border of England and Scotland. “As the tide ebbs and flows,” wrote Bede, “this place is surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea ... and twice, when the shore is left dry, it becomes again attached to the mainland.” Here, one could walk at low tide from the Scottish mainland to the island on foot, a feature that made it close enough to the joining shore to be a convenient center for a mission. For the next seventeen years Aidan would live there, erecting a monastery and branching out his missionary efforts on foot.¹⁴

Oswald developed a strong relationship with Aidan and his companions early on. Having been kept in exile among the Irish during the reign of Edwin (his father Ethelfrith’s rival), Oswald had developed fluency in the Irish tongue, of which Aidan was a native speaker. The king “humbly and gladly listened” to Aidan’s admonitions “in all manners, diligently seeking to build up and extend the Church of Christ in his kingdom.” When Aidan preached the gospel, Oswald would act as an interpreter, “for the bishop was not completely at home in the English tongue.”¹⁵ They mutually worked for the evangelization of the people, and with both the king and bishop setting such an example at the highest level, the work prospered.¹⁶

Proselytizing methods, prophecies, and miracles

Aidan himself set a profound example that impressed others of gospel living. He was “renowned for his abstemiousness and self-control, his freedom from greed or worldly ambition, his poverty, his charity, and his concern to exercise his ministry of evangelism ... with gentleness.”¹⁷ He

ministered on foot, stopping individuals by the way to inquire about their faith. If they were Christian, he would endeavor to bless them and strengthen their faith in God; if not, he would preach the gospel. Others noted his relentless proselytizing, working to reach the most extreme locations and individuals under the most acute stress. Cuthbert, a worthy successor to Aidan and one who was trained in Aidan's school of missionaries, was described in his proselytizing as one who resorted

most commonly unto those places and preach in those hamlets lying afar off in steep and craggy hills, which other men had dreaded to visit, and which from their poverty as well as uplandish rudeness teachers shunned to approach; tarrying in the hilly part, he would call the poor folk of the country to heavenly things with the word of preaching as well as work of virtuous example.¹⁸

Aidan emphasized and instructed his missionaries in this behavior. The missionaries of Lindisfarne became well-known for zealous outreach of which he principal. His emphasis on and belief in proselytizing on foot, and his ascetic and benevolent qualities, are illustrated in an encounter with the king. After Oswald's death, the new king Oswine gave Aidan a royal horse to help in covering territory more quickly. The bishop gave the horse to a beggar asking for alms. He "at once alighted and offered the horse with all its royal trappings to the beggar." When the king heard of this and asked for what reason he gave away the horse, Aidan reportedly replied, "O King, what are you saying? Surely this son of a mare is not dearer to you than that son of God?"¹⁹ The successes that resulted from this example and paradigm of proselytizing included an increase in Irish missionaries preaching "the word of faith with great devotion," priests administering baptism in great number, many "flock[ing] together with joy to hear the Word," and land given by "royal bounty to establish monasteries."²⁰

Aidan was noted for his prophetic utterances. In one case, King Oswine was so moved by Aidan's giving the royal horse to the beggar that he "at once took off his sword, gave it to a thegn,

and then hastening to where the bishop sat, threw himself at his feet and asked his pardon.” He said, “Never from henceforth will I speak of this again nor will I form any opinion as to what money of mine or how much of it you should give to the sons of God.” Rather than be cheered by the devotion exhibited by the king, Aidan was troubled and began to shed tears. When asked why he was weeping, Aidan answered, “I know that the king will not live long; for I never before saw a humble king.” He predicted that Oswine would soon be killed, “for this nation does not deserve to have such a ruler.” Shortly thereafter, the king was murdered, and Aidan himself lived only twelve days longer.²¹ Another prophecy was recorded wherein Aidan predicted a stormy sea voyage and gave sacred oil to the seafarers, instructing them to pour the oil over the side of the vessel and the rage would be calmed. Bede reported the prophecy was fulfilled to the letter, claiming to have heard it “from no dubious source, but from a most trustworthy priest of our church.”²²

After Aidan’s death, some miracles were speculated, perhaps during his appointment to Saint within Catholic procedure. Most spoke of divine healing, but one account stands out as the most dramatic of his life. During solitary prayer, Aidan looked up and saw “tongues of flame and the smoke” rising from the other side of the city walls. He raised his hands and eyes toward heaven and cried with tears, “Oh Lord, see how much evil Penda is doing.” The winds then reversed, and veering toward the oncoming attackers, “carried the flames in the direction of those who had kindled them,” terrifying Penda and his men. They ceased the attack, “realizing that [the city] was divinely protected.”²³

Death and legacy

After seventeen years at Lindisfarne, Aidan became sick and a tent was erected for him during his illness at the west end of the church where he often used to stay when traveling about the

neighborhood to preach. He leaned against the buttress which supported the outside of the church and “breathed his last,” dying on 31 August 651.²⁴ While his death was a tragedy to the monks and royalty of Northumbria, it did not bring on a decrease in conversions. Rather, his successors found continued success from implementing the methods of Aidan’s proselytizing and living the virtues for which Aidan was famous. The diplomatic effect of his ministry continued in the reign of the kings of England for centuries, with his missionary students increasing in influence and presence among the warring realms of the Middle Ages. Historians today herald Aidan for his drastically different proselytizing approach, his benevolence, and his legacy. Interestingly, even while his contemporaries criticized his intellectual mistakes,²⁵ no surviving accounts question his generosity and impact on the generations of missionaries that continued. Indeed, as Joseph Barber Lightfoot first expressed, the great Augustine of Canterbury may have been the “apostle of Kent” and St. Columba, the “apostle of Scotland,” but such a singular ministry during an epoch of savage warfare made Aidan of Lindisfarne the “apostle of the English.”²⁶

Endnotes

¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 58.

² Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Missiometrics 2006: Goals, Resources, Doctrines of the 350 Christian World Communions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30 (January 2006), 28.

⁴ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation*, (London: SCM Press, 1999), 1:163. Emphasis added.

⁵ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 3:iii. Also, in Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Oxford, 1969), 219.

⁶ Hylson-Smith, 1:167.

⁷ Neill, 60.

⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols., (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 2:56.

⁹ Bede, 3:ii.

¹⁰ Hylson-Smith, 1:168.

¹¹ Latourette, 2:57.

¹² Latourette, 2:57. Hector Beothius in his Latin history of Scotland supplies the name of this unsuccessful missionary—Corman—in Chambers and Batho, eds., *The Chronicles of Scotland by Hector Boece* (Scotland: Scottish Text Society, 1936), 1:398–400. Also, Corman's description of Northumbrians is noted in Bede, 3:v.

¹³ Bede, 3:v.

¹⁴ Bede, 3:iii.

¹⁵ Bede, 3:iii.

¹⁶ Hylson-Smith, 1:169.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bede, 4:xxvii.

¹⁹ Bede, 3:xiv.

²⁰ Bede, 3:iii.

²¹ Bede, 3:xiv.

²² Bede, 3:xv.

²³ Bede, 3:xvi.

²⁴ Bede, 3:xvii.

²⁵ Bede, for one, lambasted Aidan for erring by celebrating Easter on an incorrect date. A whole chapter in his *Ecclesiastical History* is devoted to this error, discussing his faults as purely “intellectual.” The problem was, however, common over the vast Celtic Christian base, and a council assembled at the famous “Synod of Whitby” decided upon the correct date for the observance of Easter.

²⁶ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, abridged (London: 1891).