

Missions in the Middle Ages (AD 500 – 1800)

Review

- The greatest lesson of the ancient church is that the gospel spread not by celebrity pastors or public events, but by ordinary Christians: 1) sharing their faith in regular life, and 2) forming churches. The earliest, urban Christian communities in Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria were all established by anonymous believers (cf. Acts 11.19-20).
- The ancient church spread not just into the Mediterranean West, but also into Africa, Asia, Persia, and India. The oldest Christian communities in India claim to have been founded by the direct ministry of the Apostle Thomas.
- Early Christians emphasized the “vernacularization principle” – translating Scripture and other Christian literature, hymns, etc. into the local languages of the peoples to whom they brought the gospel.
- The Christianization of the Roman Empire in the 4th century created new protections for missionary activity – but also created new challenges as the Christian faith became increasingly associated with the political state.

Key Timeline Events of the “Middle Ages” of Missions

- 622 – Muhammad moves from Mecca to Medina. Over the next century, Muslim armies sweep across the Middle East, North Africa, and even conquering most of Spain. They were stopped in 732 at a battle in France.
- 700-800 – Scandanavian Vikings emerged from the North to terrorize the settled peoples of Europe.
- 1054 – the “Great Schism” divides the Church into West (Roman Catholic) and East (Eastern Orthodox).
- 1095-1291 – Western Christians launch various ‘Crusades’ to recapture the Holy Land, ultimately retreating.
- 1200-1400 – Mongols conquer a vast empire across China, Central Asia, Persia, reaching even Eastern Europe.
- 1492 – Last of the occupying Muslim forces expelled from Spain; Columbus lands on Hispaniola.
- 1500-1600 – Spain & Portugul establish global, seafaring empires, spreading Roman Catholicism to new lands.
- 1517 – Martin Luther posts the 95 Theses in Wittenburg, beginning the Protestant Reformation.
- 1540 – The Jesuit Order is established, becoming the major vehicle for Roman Catholic missions.

Missions in Europe in the Middle Ages

- The Christianization of the Roman Empire did not complete the Christianization of Europe. Even at its greatest extent, the Empire had never managed to conquer Ireland, Scotland, Germany, or most of northeast Europe.
- God accomplished the Christianization of the rest of Europe through 3 main means (Neill):
 - **Royal Favor:** Missionary monks would begin by approaching a tribal or royal leader, seeking permission to minister to his subjects and establish a base of ministry. Alternatively, if a Christian ruler conquered a tribe of “barbarians,” the terms of peace would require conversion to Christianity.
 - **Martyrdom:** Periodic pagan uprisings would result in the persecution and murder of monks and priests. What is remarkable is how the Lord always replenished the ranks of the fallen with new missionaries.
 - **Monasticism:** Although originally developed in the 3rd century as a means of living a life of spiritual retreat *from* the world, in the 4th century monasteries became outposts for missionary labors *to* the world!
- Often times, the initial “conversion” of a people would be nominal (in name only), done at the point of a sword.
- Yet as monks worked the soil and lived lives of worship that witnessed to the peoples surrounding their monasteries, they built relationships and bore witness – slowly wearing down resistance and winning hearts.
- A few notable examples from this period give us a snapshot of the different ways things unfolded:
 - **Pope Gregory I & Augustine of Canterbury.** In 596, Pope Gregory (a former monk) sent Augustine and a team of monks on a targeted mission to Britain, where ancient Christian communities had been displaced by two invading peoples: the Angles and the Saxons. They landed in the kingdom of Kent, whose pagan King Ethelbert had married a Christian princess from France. Though the king would not initially meet with them indoors, afraid they might use ‘sorcery’ on him, he allowed them to settle in his capital at Canterbury. “Their virtuous life and their preaching made such a deep impression that the king was before long converted, and by the end of the year Augustine was able to baptized 10,000 Saxons,” (Neill).
 - **Boniface of Germany.** Sent to the Germanic tribes, Boniface (680-754) took his life into his hands to confront Germanic paganism when he attempted to cut down the sacred oak tree of Thor. “The Germans were convinced that anyone who infringed the sacredness of the sanctuary would be destroyed by the gods; Boniface affirmed that he would be unscathed. The oak was felled; nothing happened. The watchers were at once convinced that Boniface was right, and that the God he proclaimed was really stronger than the gods of their fathers. With the wood of the tree Boniface built a chapel in honour of St Peter,” (Neill).
 - **The Conversion of Iceland.** Hoping to avoid a civil war, the divided Icelandic chiefs agreed to have a pagan “law speaker” study Christianity and make a recommendation to their Parliament (Iceland has the oldest Parliament in the world). The recommendation came back in favor of Christianity, which was thus adopted. The wise man who had studied the matter, Thorgier Thorkelsson, was eventually himself baptized.

Missions to the East

- During the 7th and 8th centuries (600-800), Christian merchants and missionaries spread the gospel through central Asia. “Because of this continual witness, over time, the Syriac word for *merchant* became synonymous with *missionary*,” (Smither)
- In 635, Church of the East missionaries finally came to the Chinese imperial capital at Xi’an, the starting point of the famous “Silk Road.” They were “well received by the emperor, who himself studied the religion, approved it, and gave orders for its dissemination,” (Neill). In 781, a tall stone slab (‘stele’) was carved describing the arrival and teachings of the missionaries. The church survived in China until the mid-800s, when a Taoist emperor dissolved all monasteries, Buddhist and Christian. When monks came to China in 987 to visit the Chinese Christians, none could be found. The “Nestorian Stone” was buried, and not rediscovered until 1623-1625.
- During the years of the Mongol Empire (1200-1400), the pope sent many Christian embassies to the various *khans* (Mongol rulers). These embassies hoped to win the *khans* to faith in Christ – and in so doing win new and powerful allies to fight against Islam. Although treated well (perhaps again through the intercession of Christian princesses!), the missionaries never saw the conversion of the Mongol Empire. By the mid-14th century, the Mongols had tilted toward Islam.



Dà Qín Jǐngjiào Liúxíng Zhōngguó Bēi
“Stele of the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion of Daqin”

The Age of Discovery and the Jesuit Mission to the Ends of the Earth

- Beginning in 1492, the expeditions of Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro spread Spanish power into the Americas.
- In 1497, Portuguese Vasco de Gama sailed around Africa to reach India – bypassing Muslim-controlled lands.
- Events like these allowed European nations to begin expanding *around* the barrier of Islamic lands. As these empires expanded, motivated by “gold, God, and glory,” they carried Christian missionaries with them.
- In 1540, Ignatius of Loyola won papal approval for his Society of Jesus (the ‘Jesuits’). The goal of the Jesuit Order was to recover heretics and convert pagans. The Jesuits were the first to adopt the vocabulary of ‘missions’ to describe their work of preaching the gospel to the nations. “Within the next hundred years Jesuits were to lay their bones in almost every country of the known world and on the shores of almost every sea,” (Neill).
- Some of the more famous Jesuit missionaries were:
 - **Francis Xavier (1506-1552)**
 - Ministering first in India (AD 1542-1548), he began his evangelization work by: 1) producing rough translations of the liturgy, Lord’s Prayer, Creed, and the Ten Commandments, 2) teaching these to native teachers, and 3) sending these native teachers to teach others.
 - In AD 1549, Xavier did pioneering work in Japan. Confronted by this advanced civilization, Xavier began to develop new theories of contextualization. “He saw that, while the Gospel must transform and refine and recreate, it need not necessarily reject as worthless everything that has come before,” (Neill).
 - **Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)**
 - In a time when foreigners were not allowed to reside on the Chinese Mainland, Ricci slowly won favor by his skill in clock repair and map-making. In AD 1600, the emperor granted him permission to live and minister in the imperial capital at Beijing. By the time of his death in AD 1610, the church he had established on the Mainland had approximately 2,000 members.

What about the Protestants? – Mission to the Established Church

- Although not without minor cross-cultural efforts, early Protestants could not compete with the globe-spanning labors of the Jesuits. Part of the reason was purely logistical: the early seafaring empires were Roman Catholic!
- A second reason was that Protestants lacked missionary sending structures. Having dissolved the monasteries on doctrinal reasons, Protestants did not replace them with comparable missionary-sending structures.
- Perhaps the greatest reason was simply that early Protestants had a different focus: “The magisterial reformers strived to renew the church... evangelizing families and bringing the Reformation to bear in society. Reformation mission could best be described as a mission to evangelize and teach the established church,” (Smither).
- This said, early Protestants were not entirely without a missionary witness. Early North American colonists such as David Brainerd (1718-1747) sought to bring the gospel to Native American tribes.
- In Europe, a Protestant community in Germany known as the “Moravians” in 1727 began an around-the-clock prayer vigil that lasted for 100 years. In 1732, they began sending missionaries around the world. Some Moravians sold themselves as indentured servants in the Caribbean, in order to gain access to slave populations.
- Apart from these early efforts, “a renewed vision for Bible translation is probably the greatest legacy of the Protestant Reformation toward global mission,” (Smither).