

Church History 101

Lesson 13

Early Missions

Key Concepts: From the moment that the church was born on Pentecost it understood its mission to be that of telling the story of God's love shown in and through the Good News of Jesus Christ. This mission led to the conversion of people both inside and outside of the Roman Empire.

The Story: in this article we will take a very cursory look at the manner in which Christianity spread not only throughout the Roman Empire but also throughout the world. Between the end of Paul's life (around 64 CE) and the legalization of Christianity in 313 estimates are that almost 10% of the population of the Roman Empire had become Christian. We can see this in that by the year 100 there are reports of Christians in Monaco, Algeria and Sri Lanka. By the year 200 there were Christian communities in Portugal, Morocco, Britain, Austria, southern France, India, the Persian Empire, China, North Africa and Japan. By the year 500 there are bishops and churches in what is now Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

There are some remarkable stories of the earliest missionaries and we will examine a few of them. The first is woman named Nino (now St. Nino) who lived around 296-340). Nino was the child of a Roman family and was related to St. George (yes of the dragon killing fame). She went to what is now the nation of Georgia (ancient Iberia) where the people worshiped the Persian gods. While there she converted the queen, Nana. This led to the conversion of the King, who according to tradition, while lost prayed to Nino's god and was saved. The King, Mirian III eventually declared Christianity to be the religion of his empire. An interesting fact is that in the nation of Georgia, Nino is one of the most popular names for girls.

The second was a man by the name of Ulfilas (311-383). He was born to parents who were Greek but were taken as captives by the Goths (a Germanic tribe that ranged from Sweden into Greece). Raised as a Goth, we are not sure when he became a Christian, but when he did he became an Arian Christian (meaning he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus). He was also fluent in Greek and Latin and used that knowledge to create a written language for the Goths and then translate the Bible from Greek into Gothic (fragments of his original work still exist). During that time he was ordained as a bishop and converted many of the Goths to Arian Christianity.

The next three are Ninian who lived in the 4th to 5th century, Palladius (408-431) and Columba (521-597). They are credited with taking the Gospel to the Pictish people. The Picts were a tribal confederation that lived in what is now northern Scotland from the Iron Age until about the 10th century. Their religion had been a Celtic polytheism. Under these missionaries the Picts slowly become Christian. Columba is also the founder of the Presbyterian? training center on Iona.

The last of the missionaries we will look at is Patrick who is considered to be the founder of Christianity in Ireland. There are no firm dates for his life but he lived in the mid fifth century. As a child he was not an active Christian. At the age of 16 he was captured and enslaved by Irish Pirates. After six years he made his escape and returned to Britain. He began to develop his faith, ultimately studying in Europe before returning to Ireland. As an outsider his life was constantly at risk, yet he managed to baptize thousands of converts and ordain priests to found new communities. There are some wonderful legends about Patrick including his using the shamrock to teach about the Trinity and his banishing all the snakes from Ireland.

Questions:

1. How do these stories help you better understand the spread of Christianity?
2. Does any of this information surprise you? Why or why not?
3. How have you made an effort to share your faith with someone else?