

Mission Amid Sixth Century Crises: Reflections on Gregory the Great, the Mission to England, and Thoughts for Today

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An eighth-century biography of Bishop Gregory I of Rome (540-604) attests that one day, before he was bishop, Gregory saw boys “with fair complexions, handsome faces, and lovely hair” being sold in the slave market in Rome.¹ Inquiring about their identity, he was told that they were *angli* (Anglo or English). Responding with a play on words, he declared, “they have the face of angels [*angeli*] and such men should be fellow-heirs with the angels in heaven.”² Though scholars regard this story as a legend, around 596, several years after becoming bishop of Rome, Gregory sent Augustine of Canterbury (d. 604) and a group of about forty monks on a mission to evangelize the English—the first cross-cultural mission ever initiated by a Roman bishop.

In this paper, my aim is to first present Gregory the Great as a mission-minded bishop and sender of missionaries. Next, I will describe the mission to England—the hardships, outcomes, and approaches to mission. Finally, as we consider mission amid global crises in the 21st century, what do we learn from Gregory’s monastic theology of mission, his commitment to the mission, and his care for the missionaries?

Gregory the Great

Following a career in government service, Gregory became a monk in 574. He founded the monastery of St. Andrew on his family’s estate in Rome and later initiated six other monastic communities. Influenced by the monastic theology of Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), Gregory

¹ This story is also recounted by Bede in *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.

² Bede in *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1; cf. Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 57-58.

celebrated a monastic vision that fused a life of contemplation with active ministry. In 578, Bishop Benedict of Rome appointed Gregory as a deacon and put him in charge of distributing material aid throughout the city. After serving as a papal envoy to Constantinople, Gregory returned to lead St. Andrew's monastery until 590 when he became the first monk in church history to be set apart as the bishop of Rome.³

Gregory's work as a deacon alerted him to the spiritual and material needs of the Romans. A decline in agricultural productivity coupled with a plague that broke out after the Tiber River flooded created many social and economic problems in the city. In addition, an attack by the neighboring Lombards in the Italian countryside in 586 caused the Romans to live in constant fear of further invasions. Gregory served as a monk and church leader in this environment of social, economic, and political tension.⁴ Despite the great needs on his doorstep that could have easily occupied all of his energy, Gregory's missionary vision was bigger than Rome and he turned his eyes to the English.⁵

Why was Gregory burdened for England? Though the story of Gregory encountering English boys in the slave market is questionable, Anglo-Saxon slaves were trafficked in Rome. We also know that Gregory purchased the freedom of teenage slave boys and gave them an education in the monastery. According to Gregory's letter to Candidus in 595, these liberated slaves included English boys.⁶

³ Cf. Zinn, "Gregory I the Great," 488; Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 10-13; also Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great*, 21, 26, 28-30.

⁴ Cf. Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 2-8; 97-107.

⁵ Cf. Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 54, 57; also Zinn, "Gregory I the Great," 489-490.

⁶ Gregory, *Letter* 6.10; Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction*, 150; cf. Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 59; Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 2; and Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 177-178.

Gregory was also interested in the English because they represented the last vestiges of paganism within the Roman Empire. Though the Roman British had been evangelized since the fourth century, they did little to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons because they were often at war with and even oppressed by their English neighbors.⁷ Following Constantine's peace to the church in 313, Theodosius I's declaration of Christianity as the imperial religion around 390, and Justinian's closure of the final pagan temples in 529, Gregory seemed motivated to complete Rome's Christianization by reaching the pagan Anglo-Saxons.

Finally, it is also possible that Queen Bertha, a Christian from Gaul and wife of the English King Ethelbert, had appealed to Bishop Gregory for missionaries. Gregory's letters reveal much interaction with Gallic monarchs and he may have been acquainted with Bertha.⁸ While each of these reasons for engaging the English are plausible, Gregory's motivations for initiating toward the Anglo-Saxons were ultimately pastoral: "He wanted the English to have the benefit of the gospel."⁹

The Mission to England

Our main sources for understanding the mission to England are Gregory's pastoral letters and Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*.¹⁰ Bede began his narrative by writing: "Gregory, prompted by divine inspiration, sent a servant of God named Augustine and several more God-fearing monks with him to preach the word of God to the English race."¹¹ The

⁷ See Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 13-16, 22-30 for a description of Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs and practices; cf. Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 80-82.

⁸ Cf. Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 178, 185-186.

⁹ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 60; cf. Snyder and Tabbernee, "Western Provinces," 460.

¹⁰ See Gregory, *Letters* 6.51-59; 8.30; 9.11; 9.108-109; 11.61; 11:63-66; 14.16; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.23-2.3; also Markus, "Chronology of the Gregorian Mission", 16-30; and Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 3.

¹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.23.

missionary team probably numbered around forty monks. Because Bede's account presents Gregory as a strong and assertive bishop and Augustine as a weak and uncertain monk, one might wonder why Augustine was chosen to lead the effort. The most likely reason was that since Augustine was already serving as the abbot of Gregory's St. Andrew's monastery, the Roman bishop had a great deal of confidence in him. In addition, the monks in Augustine's charge on the English mission made a vow of obedience to Augustine—the same vow that Augustine had made to Gregory.¹² The ascetic vows of obedience proved to be a defining factor in the mission.

Sometime after setting out from Italy *en route* to England, the mission team experienced dissension or became overwhelmed by the hardship of the journey and the task before them. Bede wrote that “they began to contemplate returning home rather than going to a barbarous, fierce, and unbelieving nation.”¹³ Augustine left the group for a time and returned to Rome to convince Gregory that the mission should be abandoned. Bishop Gregory demonstrated pastoral care for his struggling abbot; however, he refused to allow the monks to return. Instead, he sent Augustine back with a brief letter encouraging the group:

You must, most beloved sons, fulfill the good work . . . with the help of the Lord, you have begun. Let, then, neither the toil of the journey nor the tongues of evil-speaking men deter you; but with all [urgency] and all fervor go on with what under God's guidance you have commenced, knowing that great toil is followed by the glory of an eternal reward. Obey in all things humbly Augustine your provost, who is returning to you, whom we also appoint your abbot, knowing that

¹² Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 61.

¹³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.23; also McHugh, “Augustine of Canterbury,” 154-155.

whatever may be fulfilled in you through his admonition will in all ways profit your souls. May Almighty God protect you with His grace, and grant to me to see the fruit of your labor in the eternal country; that so, even though I cannot labor with you, I may be found together with you in the joy of the reward; for in truth I desire to labor. God keep you safe, most beloved sons.¹⁴

As the journey continued, Augustine and the monks entered Gaul at Marseilles and continued on through Tours before arriving at Kent in England. Gregory sent letters of commendation to a number of Gallic bishops and members of the Frankish monarchy, particularly Queen Brunhild, who seemed especially interested in the mission to England.¹⁵

Arriving at Kent, Augustine and company were greeted by King Ethelbert, who chose to meet them outside on the island of Thanet, fearing the monks might attempt some harmful magic. The king allowed them to settle at Canterbury and gave them freedom to preach the gospel among his people. According to Gregory, in the first year of their ministry, over ten thousand Anglo-Saxons believed the gospel and were baptized. Eventually, King Ethelbert embraced the gospel for himself.¹⁶

After the initial wave of ministry and the fruitful response, two monks named Laurence and Peter were sent back to Rome to give a full report to Gregory. Following these initial efforts in England, Augustine traveled to Gaul where he was set apart as a bishop for the work among the English. Later, he was promoted to metropolitan bishop, which meant he also supervised the

¹⁴ Gregory, *Letter* 6.51 (all English translations are from *Nicene Post Nicene Fathers*).

¹⁵ Gregory, *Letters* 6.52-55, 57-59; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.24; also Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 6-8.

¹⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.25-26; Gregory, *Letter* 8.29; cf. Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 62-64; Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 12; and Markus, "Chronology of the Gregorian Mission," 19-24.

work of other bishops.¹⁷ Around 601, Gregory sent more monks to assist in the ministry, including Mellitus who would later become the bishop of London, and Paulinus who would become bishop of Kent.¹⁸ The monks remained based in the monastery and the church constructed at Canterbury.¹⁹

Approaches to Mission

Approaching Leaders. Under Gregory's direction, how did Augustine and the monks approach mission in England? First, similar to other missionary monks, they began their work by first approaching the king. Though Ethelbert did not initially embrace the gospel, he gave the monks space to build a monastery and church and the freedom to preach among his people. Gregory's act of sending monks to England may have come at the invitation of Queen Bertha, who surely influenced her non-believing husband to consider the gospel. In addition to his wife, other Christian monarchs of Gaul may have also influenced Ethelbert spiritually, particularly the neighboring Merovingians who had developed a strong kingdom based on Christian principles.²⁰

Preaching and Example. Second, the monks preached the gospel and lived exemplary lives among the English. Bede described the monks' task as primarily "preach[ing] the word of God."²¹ Bede described their preaching and example with the following:

¹⁷ Cf. Markus, "Chronology of the Gregorian Mission," 24-28; also Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 180.

¹⁸ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.27; also Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 6; Snyder and Tabbernee, "Western Provinces," 462-463; and Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 327-339.

¹⁹ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.33; also Snyder and Tabbernee, "Western Provinces," 462-463; Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 62-63; and Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 70-71.

²⁰ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.25; also Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 10; Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 327-328; and Tyler, "Reluctant Kings and Christian Conversion," 146, 154-157.

²¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.23.

They began to imitate the way of life of the apostles and of the primitive church. They were constantly engaged in prayers, in vigils and fasts; they preached the word of life to as many as they could; they despised all worldly things as foreign to them; they accepted only the necessities of life from those whom they taught; in all things they practiced what they preached . . . some, marveling at their simple and innocent way of life and sweetness of their heavenly doctrine, believed and were baptized.²²

Through this, the monks emulated Gregory's vision for ministry. Not only did he see preaching as the primary duty for a minister, but he also commended preaching through one's example.²³ In his *Pastoral Rule*, he exhorted: "those who offer the words of holy preaching must first be vigilant in the zeal of good works" and "before they offer any words of exhortation, they should proclaim by their actions everything that they wish to say."²⁴

Miracles. Third, Bede reported that their message was "confirmed by performing many miracles."²⁵ As Augustine related back to Gregory miraculous accounts, the Roman bishop freely shared this news with others in his correspondence.²⁶ Gregory may have instilled in Augustine and the monks the expectation that miracles would accompany their ministry. In a few of his works that pre-dated the English mission—including *Homilies on the Gospels* (ca. 591), *Dialogues* (ca. 593-594), and *Moralia on Job* (ca. 595)—the bishop emphasized miracles in ministry. He seemed convinced that miracles were intimately linked to the virtuous life of the

²² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.26; cf. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 196-197.

²³ Cf. Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 80.

²⁴ Gregory, *Pastoral Rule* 3.40.

²⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.26.

²⁶ See for example Gregory, *Letters* 8.30.

minister. In this case it was the holy examples of preaching monks imitating Christ among the English. For Gregory, miracles also demonstrated the power of God to a pagan people, which helped them become convinced of the truth of the Christian message. Finally, the Roman bishop was convinced that outward miracles corresponded closely to the process of conversion within a non-believer as they heard the gospel being preached—“leading the Angles to interior grace through exterior miracles.”²⁷ Though celebrating and even advocating the role of miracles in mission, Gregory was careful to warn Augustine not to become prideful about such acts of power:

I know, most beloved brother, that Almighty God, out of love for you has worked great miracles through you for the [English] . . . It is therefore necessary that you should rejoice with trembling over this heavenly gift and fear as you rejoice. You will rejoice because the souls of the English are drawn by outward miracles to inward grace: but you will fear lest among these signs which are performed, the weak mind may be raised up by self-esteem and so the very cause by which it is raised to outward honor may lead through vainglory to its inward fall.²⁸

Contextualization. Fourth, Augustine and the monks contextualized Christianity in the English pagan context, especially regarding places of worship and religious festivals. Though Gregory originally instructed the monks to destroy idols and temples,²⁹ he changed his mind in a follow-up letter:

²⁷ Wood, “Mission of Augustine,” 14; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.31; cf. Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 74.

²⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.31.

²⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.29-32; 2.3-7; also Gregory, *Letters* 11.66.

The idol temples of that [English] race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them . . . For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God.³⁰

Though Gregory was clearly intolerant of the continued presence of pagan idols and ordered them destroyed, he did believe that the pagan sacred space could be redeemed and transformed into a suitable place for sincere Christian worship. Seeing nothing inherently evil about the physical structures themselves and showing little concern that pagan memories of worship would overcome the English as they entered these buildings, Gregory showed much sensitivity to the local people in giving this direction. He wanted them to feel comfortable worshipping as Christians in familiar surroundings.

Similarly, Gregory believed that pagan festivals could also be transformed into opportunities for Christian worship. Referring to a certain festival where cattle were sacrificed, he advised Augustine and the monks:

And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this . . . Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own

³⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.30. On the apparent change of mind, see Markus, “Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy,” 36.

food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision.³¹

Again, with no tolerance for idolatry, Gregory stated that a festival like this could continue if the object of worship (the one true God) and the heart of worship (thanksgiving) were properly oriented.

In asserting a strategy of contextualization, Gregory appears to show sensitivity to and appreciation for the host culture. However, he was also a bit of a realist and acknowledged that the conversion of a people takes time and that missionaries must be patient. He wrote: “it is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds. As when one climbs a high mountain, one does not advance in great strides, but slowly and surely by small steps.”³²

Gregory’s Care for the Mission and Missionaries

The English mission was shaped by the strength and personality of its sender, Gregory. It is rightly called the Gregorian or Roman mission because Gregory dominated the narrative through his initiative for the work, and his correspondence with Frankish monarchs, church leaders, King Ethelbert, and, of course, with Augustine and the team of monks.³³ What do we learn from Gregory’s care for the mission and the missionaries to England?

First, Gregory’s commitment to the English mission was shaped by his own journey as a monk.

³¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.30.

³² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.30; cf. Snyder and Tabbernee, “Western Provinces,” 462.

³³ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.2.

Following Benedict's balanced asceticism, Gregory pursued a rigorous daily life of prayer, biblical study, and fasting. The monastic life was a voluntary form of suffering. When called from the monastery to serve as a deacon, Gregory became acquainted with the hardships of the Roman people, including economic difficulties and the fear of being invaded. He ministered to the poor and fearful with the courage and fortitude forged in his ascetic calling. So he expected Augustine and the monks sent to England to demonstrate that same courage.

Second, Bishop Gregory expected obedience from the missionary team. The monks were obedient to Augustine and all were obedient to Gregory, who had initiated the mission.³⁴ After Augustine's trip back to Rome, Gregory rejected his request to abort the mission and sent Augustine back with a letter telling the monks to "humbly obey [Augustine] in all things."³⁵

Gregory's demand for obedience did not end with Augustine or the monks as he also wrote to the recently converted Ethelbert urging that the king obey Augustine's teachings, saying, "so whatever counsel he gives you, listen to it gladly, follow it earnestly and carefully keep it in mind."³⁶

Third, Gregory placed the mission itself over the preference and comforts of the missionary team. Building on his monastic theology of mission, Gregory expected the monks to prioritize activism in ministry over monastic contemplation. In his *Pastoral Rule*, Gregory admonished ministers who merely wanted to pursue a life of prayer and study: "And there are those . . . that are enriched by many gifts and because they prefer contemplative study they decline to make themselves useful by preaching to their neighbors, and preferring the mystery of stillness they

³⁴ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.23.

³⁵ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.23; also Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 179.

³⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.32.

take refuge in the solitude of [spiritual] investigations.”³⁷ In addition, he had little tolerance for those who possessed the gifts for ministry but did not have the passion to exercise them. He added: “if they refuse to accept a position of spiritual leadership when they are called, they forfeit the majority of their gifts—gifts which they received not only for themselves, but also for those.”³⁸ While Gregory wanted the monks to grow in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and study, he saw the active and contemplative lives as two shoes worn by a minister. However, his priority was always on the activist portion.

Finally, though Gregory was rigorous and refused the team’s request to return to Rome, he demonstrated sincere pastoral care for Augustine and the monks.³⁹ Through his *Pastoral Rule*, Gregory’s primary description of the office of minister was that of a pastor. Though he was a bishop (and the bishop of Rome), he preferred to refer to himself as pastor, preacher, priest, and ruler.⁴⁰ Gregory cared for the Augustine and the team in a number of ways. First, his pastoral letters, a response to Augustine’s twelve questions about ministry in England, were filled with much encouragement but also practical instruction for the work. Some responses, such as the decision to transform pagan temples into places of Christian worship, set important missiological precedents for the work in England and elsewhere. Gregory used his position to advocate for the monks in his correspondence with church and political leaders in Gaul who provided safe passage and hospitality for the group on their journey.

As we reflect on mission in difficult places today, I pose the following questions for our

³⁷ Gregory, *Pastoral Rule* 1.5

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.23, 25. This tension between Gregory’s authority and pastoral care is discussed further in Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 26-32.

⁴⁰ See Demacopoulos, 14 in the introduction to Gregory, *Pastoral Rule*.

reflection:

1. What can modern missionaries learn from Gregory and other monks about rigor, grit, and embracing the hardship of mission?
2. What can church and mission leaders learn from Gregory about the commitment to the mission and commitment to missionaries? What can we learn from Gregory's approach to member care?
3. Is there a place today for an authority figure like Gregory in mission sending and resourcing? Should a sender be so involved in mission strategy as Gregory was?

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