

THE CONVERSION OF ENGLAND.

Study of contemporary Missionary enterprise can rightly exclude neither history nor forecast. It is as necessary for a due appreciation of the expansive work now being done by the Church that we should have some knowledge of the way in which she has attained her existing empire, as that we should be inspired by the certain universality of its future. It is but an apathetic mind that can contemplate the noble river of Christian truth now before our eyes, without its flowing motion exciting any curiosity either as to its course from its Pentecostal fountain, or its onward current from our present standpoint with ever-widening volume until, like the waters covering the sea, it emerges from restricting banks and overspreads the earth with the knowledge of God.

English Christianity has its history stretching back nearly as far as any Christianity. It is claimed that the Light shone on this land during the first century. Although the traditions of St. Joseph of Arimathea, of Linus and Claudia, and of St. Paul may not rank as history, there are sufficient corroborative circumstances to make historians treat the legends with respect, and to point to the conclusion that, by whatever Missionaries the Gospel was brought, it reached our land in the earliest ages. As the epoch of traditions expands into that of history, we find the British Church covering the land. At the Council of Arles, in the year 314, there were three British Bishops present, those of York, London, and a See that was probably Caerleon, thus representing each of the three great civil divisions. Geoffrey of Monmouth says that these leading Bishops had as many as eight and twenty suffragans. British Bishops were probably also at the memorable Council of Nicea in 325, and they certainly were at the Council of Arminum in 360. The Church had strong centres of learning and Missionary force at Glastonbury, St. Albans, and many other places, and doubtless brought into her fold the whole British race. The fact that England was actually a Christian country in these early centuries is in many respects of great importance. It is the more necessary to emphasise it from the way in which the original conversion of England has been lost sight of in the conversion, some centuries afterwards, of the heathen Teuton races—Jutes, Saxons, and Angles—who invaded the country.

Their invasions were gradual, and were spread over nearly a century and a half. They took place in the following order. In the year 449 the heathen Jutes from Northern Denmark settled in Kent on the invitation of the (Christian) British King Vortigern, who assigned that district to them in reward for their help against the Picts and Scots. In 477 Saxons who came from land to the South of Denmark, took Sussex, and, about 580, other Saxons occupied Essex.

In 547 the Angles, who came from the land between that of the Jutes and that of the Saxons, occupied Northumbria, and in 585 other Angles began to settle in East Anglia and Mercia.

Thus these Teutonic invaders possessed the whole of the Eastern and central parts of the country from North to South. Northumbria extended from the Forth to the Humber; from its borders stretched Mercia southward to the Thames; East Anglia comprised Norfolk and Suffolk, Essex being to the South of it. Across the Thames Kent was held by the Jutes; Sussex included the present county of the name with Surrey; from it Wessex stretched westwards into Hampshire, Dorset, Berks, and Wiltshire.

The Britons, and with them Christianity, were driven westwards, retaining Wales, Devon, and Cornwall, and for a long time the whole or part of Shropshire, Hereford, Monmouth, Gloucester, Somerset, and other counties. In the North-west, Lancashire, Cumberland, and Westmoreland remained in their hands, forming part of the great district of Strathclyde.

The Teutonic invasions, great as they were, by no means covered the whole country; nor were the Britons driven at first as far towards the West as they were when the Heptarchy was fully established.

We have now to sketch briefly the evangelisation of the Teutons. The earliest settlers were the first to receive Christianity. In the year 597 St. Augustine converted Ethelbert, the Jute King of Kent; and the conversion of Kent was eventually the sole direct result of his mission. Sebert, King of the East Saxons, was a nephew of Ethelbert, by whose advice he received Mellitus, one of St. Augustine's band; but his work was completely overthrown twelve years later by Sebert's sons. Paulinus, another of the Augustinian Missionaries, was consecrated Bishop for Northumbria on the marriage of Edwin, King of that country, with Ethelburga, the daughter of Ethelbert. A like disaster, however, overtook this Mission; for Penda, the heathen King of Mercia, completely destroyed it seven years afterwards; King Edwin was killed in battle, and the Bishop, Paulinus, fled. Before this happened, Paulinus had converted Eorpwald, the King of East Anglia, but his nobles were unwilling to follow his example, and killed him.

The result, therefore, of the Augustinian Mission was the conversion of Kent, and abortive Missions to Essex, Northumbria, and East Anglia. Mercia, Sussex, and Wessex were untouched. That St. Augustine's Mission thus produced the conversion of Kent alone is a fact worthy of notice both for correcting misleading exaggerations of the extent to which the conversion of England is due to that Mission, and for replying to those who think that a comparison of the success of ancient and modern Missions must be to the disadvantage of the latter.

The actual conversion of the Saxons and Angles took place by degrees, and in the following way:—Sigbert, a brother of Eorpwald, the murdered King of East Anglia, had fled to Gaul. There he was converted from heathenism, and on becoming king in succession to his brother, invited Felix of Burgundy to East Anglia. Felix obtained the Pope's sanction, and, aided by the Celtic Missionary Fursey, succeeded in the work, founding the See of Dunwich, which was afterwards transferred to Norwich.

Oswald, who eventually succeeded Edwin as King of Northumbria (having fled to Scotland when Edwin, as yet a heathen, had robbed Oswald's father of his kingdom of Bernicia), had become a Christian at Iona. On gaining the throne he sent to that cradle of the faith for Celtic Missionaries, and in 635 St. Aidan became Bishop for Northumbria, with his seat at Lindisfarne.

Birinus, from Gaul, went to convert Wessex in 684. In the following year, Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, sought in marriage the hand of the daughter of Cynegils, King of Wessex. By his persuasion, and that of Birinus, Cynegils was baptized at Dorchester in Oxford, where Birinus fixed his See.

The influence of the King of Northumbria also produced the conversion of Essex and Middlesex, the king of that district being persuaded by him to become a Christian. He asked for teachers from Lindisfarne, and St. Cedd was sent, who, in 654, revived the See of London, which had been founded twice before; the first time by the original British Church, and the second time by Mellitus.

Mercia was converted by a Mission from Lindisfarne, Diuma being consecrated Bishop for that great central kingdom in 656.

The consecration of Theodore to the Archbishopric of Canterbury in 669 was an important epoch in the history of the English Church. He consolidated the Church, subdivided the dioceses, created the parochial system, and held the great Synods of the whole English Church at Hertford in 673, and Hatfield in 680.

It is remarkable that one important district, and that, one which lay next to Kent, was actually left without any Missionary operations until after this. It was not until the year 681 that Wilfrid, who, though a Roman partisan, was a Lindisfarne monk, began the conversion of Sussex, fixing his See at Selsey, whence it was afterwards transferred to Chichester.

We can now sum up the results of the various Missions. Wales, Devon, and Cornwall, and the counties adjoining, having Celtic or "British" Christianity, the north-western districts also

retaining theirs in connection with Iona, and Kent being converted by the Mission of St. Augustine, the remainder of the whole of the country in time became Christian. Northumbria, Essex, Middlesex, and Mercia were converted entirely by Celtic Missionaries; East Anglia by Felix of Burgundy, aided by Fursey, the Celtic Missionary; Wessex by Birinus from Gaul, aided by Northumbrian influence; and Sussex by Wilfrid, after the consolidation of the whole of the rest of the Church under Theodore.

Even this extremely brief summary serves to suggest some important reflections. It is not uncommon for those who have little acquaintance with the history to regard English Christianity as really owing its existence to Pope Gregory sending St. Augustine; and in view of Roman pretensions it is useful for it to be seen how (originally) the country was wholly occupied by non-Roman Christianity, and (afterwards) how largely the conversion of the Saxons and Angles was due to non-Roman Missions. The whole of the West (from north to south) belonged to the British Church, being entirely independent of any Roman origin; while the re-conversion of the rest of the country after the Teutonic invasions was mainly effected by the Celtic Missionaries, who had, of course, nothing to do with Rome. Two of the smaller kingdoms were converted by Continental Missionaries with Celtic aid, and Kent alone was made Christian by the Augustinian band. To this it may be added that Theodore's organization made the whole Church with its double origin (British or Celtic, and Roman) one National Church, and that it was in his days, and long afterwards, under no bondage to the See of Rome (though in full communion with it and the rest of Western Christendom) any more than the Church of the United States in our days is under bondage to the See of Canterbury.

Apart from this, more practical lessons are to be learnt. They are of an encouraging nature. What could have seemed more like a death-blow to Christianity in our land than the Teutonic invasions? Yet what was their final result? They did not destroy British Christianity, but moved westwards the British Christians leaving their land to be occupied by heathen, who in turn were to be converted.

Then the failures of the Missions of Paulinus and Mellitus surely should teach these who fear or experience failure, that they should not think their great cause will fail, though a particular endeavour may seem to come to nought. Do not many modern Missions, such, for instance, as that of Mandalay, exemplify the same thing with an even happier sequel?

Further, the length of time occupied by the conversion of England supplies a cogent reply to those who complain of the rate of progress now. The work began in the first century, but it was not until nearly the end of the seventh century that the Church was organized, and the whole land won. Even that is really too early a date, for in the following centuries the Danes seemed almost to undo all the work. It was as late as A.D. 1012 that St. Alphege was martyred by them. Modern Missions in Equatorial and Southern Africa have suffered from wars and fighting. We may be encouraged by reflecting how much solid work has been accomplished by them in spite of the troubles, when we recall the more crushing reverses endured by our spiritual forefathers with ultimate triumph for Christian truth.

These are but instances of lessons to be deduced from the history of the evangelisation of England. Our object in giving a brief outline of it will have been attained (even though no particular teaching were suggested by it) if we have been able to help some of our readers to realize more truly that the Missionary energy which is now spreading the Gospel in Asia, Africa, and the isles of the sea is, with clear continuity, the same as that which, having burst forth at Pentecost in Jerusalem, came to quicken our land centuries ago. As it has done in the past, so it will certainly now impart the true Life to all lands of the earth that are as yet without the knowledge of the victory over evil, which they are to share.—*Mission Field.*