

38. ANGLO-SAXON MISSIONARIES II: BONIFACE

In the previous chapter, we learnt about Willibrord. Remember? His task was often difficult and challenging, and he experienced much opposition during his long life. But he persevered. Then God sent more missionaries from England to The Netherlands.

WINFRID

In the year 716, a relatively young man landed at Wijk-bij-Duurstede (south of The Netherlands). His name was Winfrid.

Like Willibrord, Winfrid had Anglo-Saxon parents. He did not belong to the Franks. He was related to the Saxons who lived in the eastern part of The Netherlands and Germany. He studied in English monasteries for many years and was offered the most lucrative positions. But Winfrid was not after



Winfrid 675 – 754 AD Born in Crediton, United Kingdom; Assassinated June 754 AD in Friesland. Winfrid (Boniface) is buried in the Fulda Cathedral, Germany, Wikipedia.

money and property; he felt called to do mission work among the pagans. At that time, he was still a young man. Like Willibrord, he had a cheerful and childlike faith.

His heart's desire became a reality when he landed on Dutch soil.

But he did not arrive at a favourable time. Radbod was busy destroying what Willibrord had painstakingly built up. Willibrord himself had to flee the land of the Frisians.

What must Winfrid do?

He decides to go anyway. He travels to the city of Utrecht and manages to speak with King Radbod. Respectfully but with passion, he asks the king of the Frisians if he is allowed to preach the gospel in his country. But Radbod refuses to listen to him. With rage burning in his eyes, he denies Winfrid entry into his country. Deeply disappointed, Winfrid returns to England. Radbod has made it impossible for him to do mission work in Frisia.

England is glad to see him back. Immediately, they appoint him as abbot of a monastery. Winfrid can now live a calm and peaceful life. But this does not satisfy him.

The desire to be a missionary for the pagans remains in his heart.

He wants to show those poor blind people the way of salvation. He longs to revisit those countries.

Two years later, he decides to try again. He boards a ship to cross the channel, yet this time, he does not go directly to The Netherlands; instead, he decides to visit the pope first. The pope receives him kindly, and he commissions him to go and preach in Germany. The pope also gives him a collection of relics.

Then Winfrid quickly travels north and joins Willibrord in his work for three years. This zealous, tireless missionary is getting old and is delighted to get some help.

Willibrord would have loved to keep the young and energetic Winfrid with him so that he could become his successor. But Winfrid refuses. The pope had commissioned him to go to Germany, so

to Germany he must go. He farewells his aged friend and continues his travels.
What awaits him there?
He does not know.

Winfred encountered much opposition and challenges travelling through Germany, but he persevered. Multiple times, he experienced close shaves with death. However, Winfred was not afraid of death, and God richly blessed his preaching among those savage people, although it often seemed a hopeless task. He did not allow himself to be discouraged.

Let's join Winfred on one of his missionary journeys through Germany.

THE BIG DONAR OAK TREE

A group of men struggle their way through the dark forest in the German province of Hesse. They are Winfred and his helpers. Their luggage includes a tent to protect them against any rough weather. It is getting dark already, and progress becomes

even more difficult, but Winfred wants to keep going. His helpers are tired and are looking forward to some rest. Suddenly, they see a gleam of light between the trees in the distance.

What could that be?

Winfred heads towards it, curious to find out what's there. His helpers follow him. They notice a large crowd in the dark forest when they get closer. The missionary soon realises what is happening. A group of Saxons have come together to celebrate one of their pagan feasts.

In the middle of a clearing stands a giant oak tree dedicated to Donar, the god of thunder. The Saxons worship that 'sacred' oak tree. At the base of that enormous tree lies a large sacrificial stone. Over time, the Saxons brought many offerings on that stone. This evening, the offering will be for Wodan.

Unawares, Winfred arrives just before the ceremony starts.



Winfred chopping down the big Wodan tree. Gottesdiens.org

(Historians disagree on exactly what happened next. What follows below is one of the more accepted stories.)

That evening, they plan to sacrifice a twelve-year-old boy. He was the son of the Saxon king. At the crucial moment, Winfrid manages to prevent that sacrifice from happening.

The Saxons are furious!

They threaten to kill him!

Suddenly, a bright heavenly light shines through the trees.

The Saxons are terrified.

They are so frightened they do not dare to harm Winfrid or the poor boy.

Winfrid and his helpers chop down that sacred tree. It falls with a thundering crash¹. The crowd of pagans stare, horrified at the destruction of their sacred tree, fully expecting Donar to kill the culprits with a bolt of lightning.

Surely, Donar will avenge himself!

Nothing happens.

Donar does not harm Winfrid and his helpers at all!

Now, the Saxons lose their confidence in their gods and listen attentively to Winfrid's message. Many repent and are baptised.

Winfrid uses the timber of the 'holy' tree to build a little church there.

Winfrid continued his travels through Germany, preaching the gospel wherever he went. In response, thousands turned away from paganism. He wrote that more than one hundred thousand people were baptised on that journey! This miraculous result broke the power of paganism in those regions.

The pope, Gregory II, heard of this and was so excited that he called Winfrid to Rome. As a reward, he appointed him as bishop and later as archbishop. The pope also changed his name; he no longer called him Winfrid but Boniface. That name means 'benefactor'. So, as we continue our story, we'll also call him Boniface.

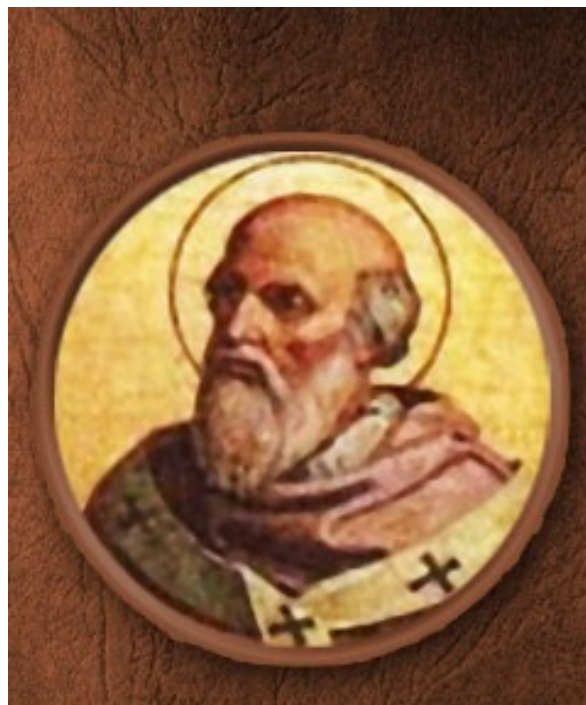
BONIFACE

Boniface acknowledged the pope as head of Christ's Church on earth. He swore allegiance to the pope and became a missionary for Rome. That was sad; the brave, zealous missionary was wrong in this. We know that the pope is *not* the head of the Church. *Christ* is the Head of His Church. The Lord Jesus does not need the pope to help Him! *He* reigns and governs His Church on earth.

Yet Boniface did a lot of good work. He founded monasteries and built churches. But, sadly, he left some relics in all those churches. He worshipped that worthless rubbish. He even believed that the relics possessed a preserving power.

Boniface worked in both Germany and The Netherlands. After the death of Willibrord, he took over the care of the Frisian churches. Naturally, he could not do it all by himself. That's why he had lots of helpers. However, he demanded strict obedience to the pope from all of them.

At the time, many priests and monks lived very sinful and wicked lives. As a result, they were a



Pope Gregory II 669-731 Wikipedia

¹ Historians all agree that the tree was chopped down and that all follows is historically correct.

disgrace to the name of Christ and caused pagans to slander the church of the Lord.

Boniface acted quickly and firmly. He deposed and sent away all those who lived an offensive life and refused to repent.

Although Boniface acknowledged the pope as head of the church, he was not afraid to tell the pope the truth. On the contrary, he seriously reprimanded the pope because he supported those wicked priests and monks.

But on the other hand, he went too far in acknowledging the pope.

All his life, Boniface did his best to unite all the Christians in those countries into one Catholic Christian Church, which was then the Roman Catholic Church. If priests did not acknowledge the pope as the head of the church, Boniface would persecute and imprison them!

To achieve that acknowledgement, he could be extremely strict. It was good that he fought for unity because God's Church should not be divided. All that division is sinful. But his mistake was that he established the Roman Catholic Church.

Perhaps you may ask: "Was Boniface a Roman Catholic then?" Sadly, the answer must be: "Yes, in most things!"

Boniface had too many Roman Catholic ideas. But we should not forget that there was *only one* church then - the Roman Catholic Church! It did not yet have as many errors as in later years. It took many centuries before the Reformation happened. With the Reformation, God would deliver His people from the power of Rome. In the meantime, God still had His children in the Roman Catholic Church. There have always been people of the Lord on earth; His church will remain till the last day. That's why God maintained the Roman

Catholic Church, despite the dreadful apostasy and the serious errors.

And Boniface?

His preaching still presented Christ as the only Saviour, the only ground of salvation. But he also held to many serious errors: his acknowledgement of the pope and his adoration of relics.

What he believed about the Lord's Supper was

also wrong. He taught that the bread and wine changed into Christ's flesh and blood, accepting the popish mass.

What must we say about Boniface?

I do not know. I dare not judge whether he is saved or lost. But, thankfully, I do not have to judge Boniface. God has judged him, and that was a *righteous* sentence. I am sure of

one thing. God did *not* err.

Once again, I want to emphasise that the people of the Lord were still in the Roman Catholic Church in those days. Only later would God deliver His people *out* of the Roman Catholic Church. That would happen through the Reformation.

As mentioned, Boniface mainly preached in Germany and Willibrord among the wild Frisians in the Netherlands. Those two undaunted missionaries have done so very much for God's church. Both were means in God's hand for the extension of His Kingdom. True, they had their errors. Boniface, even more than Willibrord, yet God wanted to use their preaching to bless many. Therefore, he sent those two *Anglo-Saxon* missionaries so that the double hatred of the pagans for the *Frankish* missionaries would not bother them.

Willibrord died in the year 739. That was a heavy blow for both the Frisian church and Boniface.

'Can there be a more fitting pursuit in youth or a more valuable possession in old age than a knowledge of Holy Writ? In the midst of storms, it will preserve you from the dangers of shipwreck and guide you to the shore of an enchanting paradise and the ever-lasting bliss of the angels.'

— St. Boniface

Now, Boniface has become much busier. Nevertheless, he did not forsake the young Frisian church. On the contrary, though he barely had time for it, he added the care of the Frisian church to his work. That was a good thing because dark times were dawning for that church.

RADBOD II

In 753, fourteen years after the death of Willibrord, Radbod II became king of the Frisian people. This new king was strictly pagan and did not tolerate Christianity in his country. He persecuted the Frisians who had become Christians. Radbod II travelled through the country, murdering and burning all things Christian. Churches and monasteries went up in flames. Only heaps of smoking rubble were left. He killed hundreds of priests and monks, and the ordinary church members had to return to paganism or else the savage pagan hordes of Radbod II would cruelly murder them. Radbod II would not rest until he had exterminated Christianity from his land and restored the ancient worship of the gods to its former glory. He was encouraged by the pagan priests who had jealously watched the progress of Christianity. The Christians shed so much blood and tears!

No pen can describe what those new believers suffered under Radbod II. Only God knows that.

Boniface, already seventy-four years old, hears what is happening to the Frisian church. And ... that brave old man immediately travels north.

He will visit the severely persecuted Christians in Friesland. He wants to comfort them. He will preach the gospel there again to encourage those whose blood the pagans are shedding in streams.

Brave Boniface!

How does he dare to go? Oh, when it concerns the church of the Lord, Boniface does not think of himself, does not consider his age, does not feel the fatigue of such a journey: he simply goes.

And ... God richly blesses that preaching!

In the face of vehement persecution, thousands of Frisians believed and were baptised, despite the threat to their lives. Here, too, we see that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church!

No matter how terribly Radbod II raged, he could not destroy God's church! God Himself took care that His church remained. Here we again see something of that terrible warfare between Christ and Satan, warfare which will continue to rage until Christ appears on the clouds of heaven. Only then, and not before, will that war end.



*This painting was made in the year 975 and shows Boniface baptising one of his converts and also this martyr's death.
Kerkgeschiedenis 1 pg 289*

DEATH OF BONIFACE

It is 5 June 754, the day of Pentecost! Slowly, the sun rises above the horizon. That night, a heavy dew hung above the Frisian fields, but the warmth of the sun's rays soon dissipated the thick bank of fog. It looks to become a beautiful summer day, full of radiant sunshine. Boniface and his fifty-three helpers are camping near a small town called Murmerwoude, close to Dokkum, in the north of Friesland. Some writers say they arrived in boats and slept on the shore in tents. It is quite possible. Boniface and his helpers are already awake. Although it is still early, everyone in the camp is busy. They expect visitors this morning.

Boniface has been preaching in the north of Friesland, which bore much fruit! Many Frisians turned their backs on paganism and became Christians. Today, Boniface and his helpers hope to baptise them!

What a solemn and beautiful moment that will be!

Boniface is delighted. Which farmer does not rejoice when he sees the harvest ripening in the fields? Boniface has also sown. He has scattered the seed of God's Word, and that seed had germinated and borne fruit in the hearts of many pagan Frisians. Now they shall be baptised.

On this beautiful summer morning in June, it is still tranquil and peaceful. All of nature breathes peace and rest.

Listen!

Boniface hears a very soft noise in the distance, but gradually, it becomes louder and more evident. A happy smile appears on his wrinkled face. He thinks the converts are coming early. The noise becomes louder and louder, swelling ominously. Suddenly, wild screams are heard, mingled with cries for help. Boniface rushes outside because he cannot imagine what it could be! There he discovers to his horror, that he is badly mistaken! Not the new Christians, but a raging, howling mob of pagan Frisians is approaching their camp! They are full of hatred and rage toward the Christians. They want to kill those strange intruders! What are they doing here? They have no business here! Immediately, Boniface realises that flight is impossible. The yelling mob is too close already.

His helpers reach for their swords. Of course, they will defend themselves to the best of their ability! But Boniface forbids them to do that. He says: "Just get the relics."

He encourages his frightened and alarmed helpers. He says:

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body."

What happened then is too terrible to describe, but I may not conceal the truth.



'....with terrifying howls, those brutes come rushing in' <https://slmedia.org/blog/stand-fast-in-what-is-right-st-boniface>

Look, there stands the group of defenceless Christians. Then, with terrifying howls, those brutes come rushing in, clenching the heavy clubs in their strong hands.

The wild pagans smash their dangerous weapons down on the heads of the Christians, who fall to the ground, dying. Bruised and bleeding, Boniface also falls to the ground.

It is all over in a few moments.

There lie the mutilated bodies of fifty-four mission workers, including Boniface. They all died because of the cruel violence of the pagan Frisians. Cheering and jeering, the mob turns back. They have completed their dreadful work.

A deep silence descends on the camp of the missionaries; it is the silence of death.

The rumour of this horrific massacre soon spreads.

The sad news also reaches the Frankish Empire. Fierce anger fills the hearts of all who hear it. It is anger mixed with sorrow. When the Frankish king hears about it, he decides to take revenge. This atrocity may not remain unavenged.

He must stop Radbod II's desire to kill!

He marches to the far north with a strong army. He wreaks bloody vengeance on the murderers, and their king, Radbod II, must flee.

All very well, but Boniface is dead! Frankish soldiers carry his body to Utrecht, and later, they bring it to the monastery at Fulda. The little city of Fulda is in Germany.

They buried him in the country where he worked for the most significant part of his life with many blessings.

There, his body lies till the last day.

Then it shall arise.

Others continue his work. God preserves His church, and other missionaries finish the work Boniface had begun. I could tell you lots about those missionaries and their work.

One of them, a certain Ludger, preached in Groningen. Despite much opposition, this missionary did not bring the gospel there in vain.

Great stories, but I cannot mention everything, for I would never get it done. That's why we will stop here. We simply want to show you the golden

thread that runs through history, the thread of God's almighty rule and eternal faithfulness. Now we understand a little of how much strife and trouble it costs to bring the gospel to the Netherlands. Those people gave their lives for the furtherance of the gospel. The service of the Lord was worth everything to them.

No matter how much Satan exerted his power to prevent the spread of the gospel, he was not successful!

King Jesus has conquered.

Paganism *had* to yield.

God's plan never fails. What value do we place on the Lord's service? Let us all examine ourselves!

Let each of us answer that question for ourselves.

QUESTIONS

1. Identify Winfrid. How did his first missionary journey fare?
2. How and why did he receive a commission to go to Germany?
3. How did Winfrid end the worship of the sacred oak in Hesse? What results did it have?
4. How did he receive the name Boniface?
5. List the errors of Boniface.
6. List some of the good things he did.
7. What was the foundation of his preaching?
8. Why was the Frisian Church added to Boniface's responsibility?
9. What were the two goals of Radbod II?
10. How did Boniface react to the afflictions of the Frisian church?
11. How did Boniface die?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Boniface's list of errors (Question #5). Which error do you feel was the most serious? Why?
2. Discuss Boniface's desire for unity. On what basis may we unite with another church? When must we remain separate?