The Coming of the Gospel among the Frisians

Dr. Henry Beets[1]

Translated from the Dutch by

Dr. Jan H. Boer

2019

[1]Henry Beets, trans. Jan H. Boer, *Triumphen van het kruis: Schetsen der christelijkezending van alleeeuwen en allerleilanden.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1914, pp. 50-67. Beets was for many years the director of the mission outreach of the Christian Reformed Church, a North American denomination of Dutch origin.

The Coming of the Gospel among the Frisians

CANADIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY AND…..

ISBN…..

Dr. Henry Beets, Author

***Triumphen van het Kruis,* pp. 49-67.**

Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Eerdmans –Sevensma, 1914.

Dr. Jan H. Boer, Translator

The Coming of the Gospel among the Frisians, 2019.

For more information contact the translator on his website
www.SocialTheology.com

Vancouver, BC,
Canada
2019

Translator's Introduction

Dr. Jan H. Boer

The purpose of this document is to briefly tell the story of early Christian missionary work among the people of the Netherlands, specifically the Frisians.[2] This story was originally written in the Dutch language by Dr. Henry Beets, an early Director of the missionary arm of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a North American denomination of Dutch background, and author of quite a number of books on that church's history and missionary work, among them *Johanna Veenstra,*a book that appears in themissionary section of

www.SocialTheology.com/GuestArticles.hmt .

While the entire book is wide in scope and pretty well covers the entire world of missionary endeavours up to his time, this selection is restricted to the earliest endeavours among the Frisians.

This document is a translation of several chapters in Beets' book and, in fact, begins in the middle of a sentence. Hence,the beginning ellipsis. The preceding part of the chapter deals with missionary myths and legends that cannot be verified and, after being summarized, are rejected by the author. Furthermore, the preceding part of the chapter deals mostly with the southern Netherlands, which is now Belgium. Beets' main focus in this part of his book is on Frisia,a region of the Netherlands much larger then than it is today.

That website features several books about the CRC of about the same era. Two others form a two-volume series, *The Early Christian Reformed Church in Its Own Words,* and is found at the bottom of the Boeriana page. That series deals

[2]This document is published in a number of places, including the ISBN system of the Canadian National Library. The rational for publishing it in the Canadian National Library is that many thousands of the descendants of these Frisians have emigrated to both Canada and the USA, where a good number of them continue to espouse the Christian Gospel. This is now part of the history of Canadians.

with the CRC of the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th, a period that coincided with the life of Beets. The *events* of this Beets book took place in much earlier centuries, but the *spirit* in which this book is written is similar to the contents of the series. Bates' book shares their basic *pious*emphasis on the spiritual and personal aspects of the Christian faith, which I share, but they also veer into the direction of *pietism*, a perspective I do *not* share. This has led to his frequent and correct critique of the failure of many early mission endeavours to sustain themselves due to their emphasis on the externals of the faith developed over time and on its legalisms.

These missionary developments took place during a very volatile history in Western Europe. Missionaries were often supported by kings and popes but also controlled by them. Wars and power shifts frequently led to missionaries being recalled and reassigned, that is, change location. Beets adequately linksthese wars and powershifts with missionaries' movements around the country. But Beets' references are all in-house events, i.e., within the Western European peoples of Frisians, Saxons, Anglo-Saxons, Irish and Franks, but excluding the effects of Scandinavian Viking raids, which were spreading terror never seen before. In Beets' account, England and Ireland were sources of erudition, learning and of missionaries. It all seemed comparatively peaceful in those countries. But one reads nothing about the Vikings. The Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin of York

> **read with outrage the first reports of Viking raiders in England. "Never before has such a terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race." Behold the church of St. Cuthbert, spattered with the blood of priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as prey to pagan peoples.**
>
> **The initial raiding parties…focused on coastal or island monasteries in the British Isles—soft targets with few defences. Making short work of unarmed monks, the raiders helped themselves to the treasures and even took high-ranking clerics and important medieval manuscripts for ransom, demanding gold and silver for their safe return. Some prominent cloisters**

> **were struck repeatedly. The wealthy monastery on Scotland's Isle of Iona, for example, suffered three violent Viking raids between 795 and 806 alone. The last concluded with the massacre of 68 monks, novices, and others.[3]**

None of the above is referred to in Beets' stories, but I believe being aware of all that terror serves to increase our appreciation of these ancient Gospel pioneers. It was *from* these places that some of the missionaries came and it was *to* these places that many missionaries went for their training. They could not possibly have been unaware of all this terrorism, destruction and death. I know from my own experience as a student in the midst of Nigeria's civil war in the late 1960s how such turmoil can make study next to impossible. I thought it well to alert you to that part of that missionary context.

One characteristic I have developed over the years of writing is to capitalize all words referring to Deity, including pronouns. I have always rejected the propriety of using the lower case for such references as bringing Him down to our level; it is too democratic; somehow it seems to take the incarnation to an extreme. However, it is not a recent practice, for even Beets in his 1914 publication uses the lower. I recently came across Peter Kreeft's defense of my practice to which I give my hearty "Amen!" He treats us to a "NOTE" on his copyright page:

> **Throughout this book I have insisted on capitalizing Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, as well as pronouns referring to the deity, contrary to current convention. My justification for the first is that these places are quite as real and substantial as Kokomo or Timbuktu; and the second is justified practically, for clarity's sake, as well as theologically, out of respect and adoration (which are also contrary to current convention!).[4]**

I am not prepared to break a lance for Kreeft's first justification, but I certainly am for the second.

---

[3]Heather Pringle, "The Vikings: Lords of Sea and Sword." Washington, DC.:*National Geographic,* 2018, pp. 22, 24.
[4]Peter J. Kreeft, *Everything You ever Wanted to Know about Heaven, but never Dreamed of Asking.* New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

The Triumph of the Cross among the Frisians

Dr. Henry Beets

Eligius, a Goldsmith and First Great Missionary to the Frisians

….another messenger of the Gospel who can be regarded the first missionary to the Netherlands, because he preached Christ among the Frisians and the people of the province of Zeeland, inhabitants of the Netherlands.That man was Eligius of St. Eloi. He was born in AD 588 in the village of Chatelat near Limoges, France. From his youth on he feared the Lord, as did his father Eucherus. During his youth he did not qualify for ecclesiastical office.So, instead, he learned the goldsmith trade. He became highly skilled and was therefore appointed Master of the Mint of the King of France, Dagobert I, who reigned from AD 629-639, and of his successor Chlodvig II. His responsibility was to manage the minting of money, a prestigious office in those days.

However, Eligius found this prestigious position did not measure up to his ideal. He did not care for earthly praise or worldly treasures but much preferred to gather up treasures in heaven and pearls for his Master. This desire grew from strength to strength within him. It appears that he was especially influenced by Columbanus or Columba the Younger, a kindred spirit of Columba the Apostle of Scotland and his school.

Eligiussought to fulfill the desire of his soul in a peculiar manner. It was common practice in his days to buy and sell captives of war. Eligius would often buy as many of these unfortunates as his wealth allowed, sometimes twenty or even thirty. He would give them a choice as to whether to return to their home country or to stay with him. He would provide travel money to those who chose to return home and they in turn would tell their people of the fruit of

Christendom that treated their captives so generously, very different from the heathens. If they chose to stay with him, he would teach them the way of truth and many were won for the Lord. Thus it was that Eligius, the Mint Master, spread Christianity.

But he did much more of this after he was chosen Bishop of Noyon, Jean Calvin's birthplace, in 641 AD. His entire life was absorbed in his mission to win souls. He would visit and minister to the entire area then entrusted to his care—and that encompassed all of Belgium, then southern Netherlands.

He accomplished even more in a way which made him important for the northern Netherlands, now largely the present country of that name. He brought the message of salvation to the Frisians and the people of Zeeland. Initially he was mocked, insulted and beat up by our wild ancestors.[5]He persevered and by his calm demeanour, his genialityand loving reaction as well ashis penetrating and persevering preaching, he eventually gathered a large number of people under the banner of the cross. Manyaltars and images of idols were demolished, many heathens baptized and a number of churches built.Eligiuslaboured with devotion and love till death released him in 659 AD at the age of three score and ten. He went in peace.

Both his last prayer as well as his entire life has given him the reputation as one who truly feared the Lord."Lord," so he prayed on his deathbed,

> **let Your servant depart in peace, as You have promised! Remember You have made me out of dust and do not inflict judgement on Your servant, for before You no one is righteous. O, You, who alone is righteous, Christ, the Saviour of the world, release me from this body of death. Save me in Your kingdom since both are Your work, even when You wanted me to tread on the earth. You were always my protector. Into Your hands I commend my spirit. I do not deserve to behold Your face, but You know**

[5]See footnote 1. Beets considers himself a descendant of the people he is writing about.

that my hope rests on Your mercy and that I have persevered in the faith. In the confession of Your Name I take my last breath. Open to me the portal of heaven and do not allow the powers of hell to snatch me away. Guard me with Your right hand. Defend me with Your power. Lead me with Your hand to the place of refreshment, even if in the most humble of dwellings You have prepared for Your servants! Amen.

Thus the prayer of the dying Eligius. Was that not the language of one who fears God? But with all that, it is highly amazing and nearly incredible that this same man describes a "good Christian" as one who

often goes to church and brings gifts that are offered to God on the altar; who, whenever the days of holy celebrations come around, preserves their purity for some days to be able to approach the altar of the Lord with a clear conscience; who learned the articles of faith and the Lord's Prayer by rote memory.

Even more incredible is the allegation that he advised his converts,

Liberate your soul from punishment, since you have the means. Attend church frequently; pray humbly to the saints to intercede for you. If you faithfully attend to this, on the day of judgement you will confidently appear before the seat of judgement of the eternal Judge, saying, "Give Lord, because we have given."

Such advice is incredible. One who truly fears God would never offer such advice, which is the reason we believe it to be ascribed falsely to him. Of this, however, we are sure and it is confirmed from different sources that we have from that time, the Christianity that Eligius introduced in the Netherlands was not of the purest kind, which is the reason that it soon disappeared after his death.

The Labour of Wilfred and Wigbert—As a "Morning Cloud"

If Eligius' work left little lasting result, the same is true more or less with his immediate successors, Wilfred and Wigbert, as we will presently hope to see.

Wilfred or Wilfried was born an Englishman, an Anglo-Saxon. Tired of the abuse he suffered at the hands of an angry stepmother, as a fourteen-year old boy he took refuge in a monastery on an island near Northumberland, in northern England near the Scottish border. Here he enjoyed such extensive education from the monks that he was well developed and could serve as teacher to Alfred, King of Deira, in the district of Northumberland. Through the King's influence and due to his respect for the church authority of Rome, he was appointed Archbishop of York in 670 AD. Because of his active struggle on behalf of Rome and against the old British church as well as his ostentatious life and domineering character, he became a intensely hated person in England. Finally, King Elfrid and the British clerical establishment fired him and made things so unpleasant for him that he fled. His goal was to have his position and honour reinstated by the Pope in Rome. However, man may make his plans; God works them out.

While crossing the sea, a western storm overtook them and drove him to the Frisian coast—according to some, to the island of Walcheren in Zeeland. Wilfrid considered this a divine wink and began to preach. During the winter of 677-678 he penetrated deeper and deeper into Friesland with the Gospel of Salvation. Both nobles and commoners listened eagerly to the words of their English tribesman, who was much more welcome than Eligius, the Frenchman. The latter's relationship to the King of the Franks had filled them with deep suspicion, for they feared Elgius' Christendom implied dependence on the hated French King. But now there was this Anglo-Saxon, speaking to them in basically the same language but without any display of power. All this was much more attractive to the Frisians. And so Wilfrid won over many Frisians. Even princes of royal blood were baptized. King Adgild demonstrated in various ways that he

respected Wilfrid and was pleased to protect him. It appeared that Friesland would be won for Christ in short order.

Alas. It was all merely excitement and very superficial. When after barely a year Wilfrid left for Rome without intending to return to the Netherlands, the birds of the air came and picked up the seed. The pagan altar again triumphed soon over the Christian cross. It was a mere morning cloud.

It went even worse with Wigbert, Wilfrid's successor. Wigbert came to the Netherlands from Ireland with the help of a certain Egbert. Egbert was an English nobleman who was brought to the edge of the grave due to some kind of disease in the year 654. Fearful of both death and hell, he promised the Lord to dedicate his life to the conversion of Pagans if he were healed. He did heal. He would now win the people of the Netherlands for Christ. He persuadedWigbert, an Irish hermit to team up with him and together they took a ship and headed eastward. Egbert was full of enthusiasm and fire. Had he not heard the Frisians call him in a vision, "Come over and help us?"

But what happened? A terrible storm unleashed. The waves threatened to swallow the little vessel man and mouse. With great difficulty they escaped on English soil. The enthusiastic Egbert was now tired of it all. He considered the storm a sign he was not to go to Frisia after all. So he stayed at home, a superstitious person. His intentions were no more than a morning cloud.

With Wigbert, however, things took a different twist. He was likely no less enthused and more dependable.He succeeded in crossing the North Sea and appeared in Frisia. With unmatched enthusiasm he preached the Word for two years.Here and there the people inclined their ears to him. Like Wilfred before him, Wigbert was hopeful for fruit. But once again, alas—he harvested nothing but disappointment.

What happened? The tolerant King Adgild was succeeded in 679 by the well-known Radboud. As a young man the latter became enthusiastic about the gods of his ancestors in the dedicated forests of Denmark. That centuries-old

tradition was closely associated with all sorts of places and customs devoted to his Friesian worldview. It was that tradition that, according to him, was one with the old Frisian freedom but so frequently humiliated by the French Christians, that he pledged from now on to defend it as its champion hand and tooth and to spread it as its protector and defender. That was Radboud's ambition. That he regarded as his holy calling. He established his kingdom with great strength that reached its maximum spread, bordering in the north on the Lauwerzee[6], and in the south on the DeSchelde and the Rhine rivers.

It was this that made Wigbert's work end up in disappointment. In 690 Radboud violently drove the missionary out of his region and Wigbert returned to the land of his ancestors with a broken heart. The fruit of his work was even less of a morning cloud than that of Wilfrid—and yet, not totally without fruit.Wilfrid and Wigbert had ploughed the Frisian soil in which later the seed of Willibrord and Boniface found such a congenial home and produced such glorious fruit, as we will see next.

Willibrord, the Apostle to the Frisians

The real Apostle to Friesland, a designation that comprises almost the whole of the present Netherlands, was Willibrord. He lived a very eventful life. His pious father Wilgis, a Lower Saxon of Northhumberland, as well as his equally pious mother, had dedicated him to the Lord from the beginning. Very early he was entrusted into the hands of the monks of Rippon monastery and at age twenty he was ordained a priest. Desire for further education led him to Ireland, to the monastery of Egbert and Wigbert, where he would dedicate himself for another twelve years of further study. Egbert, still thinking about the overseas Pagans, though he himself had given up on his own plan for mission, kept stoking the fire of mission enthusiasm in Willibrord's breast until the latter finally started to prepare himself to go to the Netherlands for missionary service.

[6]Another acceptable spelling is "Lauwerszee," a body of water between the Wadden Zee to the north, the province of Friesland to the west and that of Groningen to the east. In genuine Dutch tradition, during the 20th century it has been turned into a fresh-water lake.

This took place in 690. A group of eleven men, filled with the same desire for mission work as Willibrord, accompanied him. The most well known among them were Adelbert and the brothers Ewaldus, Suidbert and Werenfrid. From the beginning, Willibrord was the acknowledged leader of the group.His intellectual development, his thoughtful judgement, his optimistic perspective, his patience, diligence and courage automatically made him emerge as such.

Initially,Willibrord and his band went to Utrecht. There, years earlier in 631, Dagobert I, Kingof the Franks, had founded a Christian chapel dedicated to Saint Thomas. There was even a small congregation there. However, Radboud I, King of the Frisians, had demolished almost everything and he gave Willibrord and his band to know that he had not given them permission to work. The future Apostle to the Frisians left to go to Pepin of Herstal, who at the time ruled the Franks, and turned him into his supporter. For the purpose of enhancing his prestige, he went on to Rome, where the Pope encouraged him in his ambition and supplied him with a treasure of relics. Those were all sorts of alleged remnants of dead saints to whom people of those days ascribed all sorts of magic. Equipped with all that, Willibrord returned to the Netherlands. At first, he worked south of the Rhine. When Radboud was defeated in 692 by Peppin, he was forced to open the door for Christian missionaries to the Frisians. Our hero now preached with good results.

During a second visit to Rome, Willibrord received the title Bishop among the Frisians. That happened on the recommendation of Peppin. On his return to the Netherlands, he touched land at Walcheren, an island in Zeeland. There he came upon a large crowd engaged in worshipping an image of Wodan. It is thought to be the image of an idol the same as that of one called Mercurius, that had human form with a dog head. Full of enthusiasm and with the courage of faith, Willibrord pushed his way through the crowd and announced that there is only one true God, who cannot be imaged by people. "I will show you how worthless your idol is!" he yelled. Then, with his iron fist he hit the image. It fell to pieces at his feet. Enraged about this foolhardiness, a Pagan priest attempted to cleave Willibrord's skull, but only gave him a minor wound. Most of

Walcheren's residents, convinced of the powerless of their idols, were won for Christ. That's how it went with him in in many other places.

It is claimed that he founded the five Dutch mother churches: Vlaardingen, Kerkwerve, Velzen, Petten and Heiloo. According to an ancient legend, at Heiloo a new well came into being in response to his fervent prayer. Till today that well is named after him.Many other miracles are ascribed to him, but, of course, we do not accept them.

However, here and there in the hearts of the people the miracle of grace took place. That is more believable. But we must not think too highly of the Christendom brought by Willibrord. A highly learned scholar who has done much research in this history, wrote,

> **Everyone baptized, as long as s/he recognized the authority of the Roman bishops and no longer resisted the preachers of the Gospel, was considered a convert, no matter how ignorant or how still involved in evil practices or even if still embracing superstitions that were hostile to the Evangel and the Christian religion.**

We fear that to a certain extent this was also applicable to Willibrord's work. But we also know that he was a diligent and courageous missionary, filled with holy enthusiasm for Christ's Church as he knew and propagated it, a man of whom it can be said on good grounds that "he had sought a secret relationship with God in prayer, fasting and psalms" and who exemplified this in his walk. We also know that he did much for the development of the youth.

Willibrordlaboured almost half a century in the Netherlands. He experienced plenty of both progress and regress. For example, when Peppin of Herstal died in 714, Willibrord had to flee before Radboud's victorious advancing Frisians. Later, he returned when Karel Martel had once again defeated the Frisian ruler. And again, towards the end of his life he laboured unhindered also among the Frisians. This was accompanied with increasingly visible success so that it is not for nothing that he is called the Apostle to the Frisians. He died peacefully on 6 November , 739, in Utrecht, the seat of his bishopric. At the time of his death,

Christianity was permanently settled in the Netherlands. Thus, apart from God, our forebears have to thank this Englishman for the first permanent case of successful Christianization, to him and his eleven cohorts.

Willibrord's Co-workers

The history of Willibrord's eleven co-workers who were great support for him in his mission, lies completely in the fog of legendary traditions. Those legends speak of all sorts of miracles they performed in the service of spreading the Gospel. Of course, we regard these miracles as later embellishments. But even without those embellishments, the life of these men, in so far as it is known, was full of significant events.

The most important among them was Adelbert, a descendant of the English king of Deira. He worked especially in that part of the province of Noord Holland that has long been known asKennemerland. That's why he is called the Apostle of that region. He was humble, congenial and applied much energy to saving souls. He preached everywhere in the region, often with much success. Idol images were destroyed, temples demolished and churches built. He had his residence in the village of Egmond on the shore of the North Sea. It is there that died in 740. Till this day, the local Catholics consider him their guardian saint. Many still believe that St. Adelbert once lengthened a church beam that was shorter than all the others by prayer. Another legendary miracle was that for his sake a burnt apple pit produced sprouts and fruit, not to speak of even more childish things.

The brothers Ewaldus are said to have worked in the regions of Twente in the Netherlands and in Westphalia, Germany. Born in England, they were almost identical twins, except that the one was blond and the other black. Spiritually they were twins even more than physically. Both had souls filled with love for Christ and His Kingdom, that is, mission. They traveled and worked as inseparable companions with many blessings. Both died as martyrs.

At the end of their lives, they headed south to preach the Gospel of Christ along the river Rhine. They ended up in the house of a Pagan king who invited them to dinner. According to their custom, they prayed before the meal, which filled the king with sudden wrath. He assembled his people and told them that these foreign guests wanted them to forsake their idols. That aroused the passion of this wild crowd and they attacked the two brothers. The blond one had his head immediately cloven and died. The black one had his body dismembered part by part in the most devilish cruelty. Eventually both corpses were dumped into the Rhine. That is how the brothers Ewaldus, who so dearly lovedeach other in life, could not be separated even in death.

Suidbert, an Englishman, was an abbot in Ireland and a man of wealth by the time he went to the Netherlands. The province of Gelderland was his field of labour as well as along the rivers Lek and the Waal, also known as Meuse, and in the towns of Tiel, Bommel, Heusden, Arkel and many other places. He founded many churches so that he received the title "Apostle of Teisterbant." He died as bishop in the monastery he founded at Kaiserswerth, Germany.

Werenfrid also labored in Gelderland. He died around the year 720 at Westervoort and was buried in the church he established in Elst.

We know next to nothing about the rest of Willibrord's companions, except that they worked alongside him with more or less success. The same was true for other Englishmen who followed his trail and worked under him. One of them, Engelmund, became the patron of Velzen in the province of Noord (Northern) Holland, where he is still known and honoured. Thus the Netherlands owes England many thanks as far as the introduction of Christianity goes.

The same is true for France. Earlier on we wrote about Amandus and Eligius.[7] There was a third Frenchman, Wolfram of Vulfram, who laboured with much blessing in the Netherlands at the same time as Willibrord and his companions. That is the reason he is often named in the same breath together with those English missionaries. He was a monk at Fontanelles, where, according to him, in

[7] In the original there was also an Amandus, another French missionary. However, since he worked in what became Belgium, we have skipped him in translation.

a divine revelation he was called to Frisia for the conversion of King Radboud. That was quite the assignment. But, supported by the worldly power of Peppin of Herstal, he went to the Frisian ruler and proclaimed the worthlessness of his idols and the majesty of the living God and His heaven. He spoke with animation, with power and pressure and Radboud miraculously listened with interest. The Word appeared to make an impression on him. He was convicted of being baptized, as he had already promised Peppin to receive the sacrament. In those days, baptism was a prominent concern, because it was thought to bring about regeneration[8] and forgiveness of sins. What better means then to turn people into Christians? Wolframwas overjoyed when Radboud consented to be baptized. He was even more joyful when Radboud approached the baptismal font in a baptismal robe. The king had already one foot in the water. But just when Wolfram was about to reach the height of his joy, it suddenly dissipated to turn into a bitter disappointment: Radboud suddenly had second thoughts. While standing with one foot in the baptismal font, he asked Wolfram where his royal ancestors were. "Do not be deceived, oh King," Wolfram responded, "your forefathers, the rulers of the Frisians, who died without receiving the sacrament of baptism, have undoubtedly undergone the punishment of damnation!" With that word, Radboud withdrew his foot from the water. He declared he would prefer to be with his fathers in their place than with the poverty-stricken Christians in heaven. From here on, Wolfram had no further influence on the king. A mere three days later Radboud died in 719 either in Medemblik or in Hoogwoud nearby, where the failed baptism took place. Bitterly disappointed and definitely convinced that his calling to convert Radboud was mere imagination, Wolfram left Frisia. The following year he died in Fontanelles.

Nevertheless, his mission in the Netherlands did bear fruit, for many prominent Frisians and even, it is said, one of Radboud's sons became Christian due to Wolfram's preaching. The Christianization of these nobles led to the conversion of many ordinary Frisians.

---

[8] A theological term for being born again.

Boniface

He carried a beautiful name, this man of whose story we are going to tell at this time, who occupies such an important name in the history of missions as Apostle to the Germans. His original name was Winfrid or Wynfrith, meaning "peaceful good" or "peaceful success." The Latinized version isBonifacius, derived from "*bonus*" (good) and "*facio*" (do). He was born in the year 680 to important Anglo-Saxon parents in Kleton, Devonshire, England. His parents intended a career in the civil service, but the Lord ordained him as missionary. Already early in life he revealed a desire to fear the Lord and to research His truth. That desire led him to the Nutescelle monastery in Hampshire. Through his intense study and conscientious life he earned a good reputation and fame among his fellow monks, which became clear later when they wanted him to serve as their abbot.

Boniface's heart, however, was consumed by a very different desire, namely to preach Christ among the related tribes of Frisians and Germans across the North Sea—Christ, whom he loved so dearly. That desire was constantly stirred up within him, on the one sideby a natural passion for travel; on the other, through the reports of Willibrord's struggles and triumphs in the Frisian kingdom of Radboud. He landed in Frisia in 716.

At first, he was disappointed. Though Radboud, the king of the Frisians, did not cause him any difficulties, because he had his hands full with war against Charles Martel, steward to the kings of the Franks, he had difficulties getting started, probably due to the turmoil in the country. For this reason, he retreated to his fatherland for the

time being. However, in the spring of 718 he left his fatherland for the second time, this time for good., to devote himself to mission. First of all, he headed for Rome in order to receive an appointment from Pope Paul Gregory II to conduct missionary work in German. With a supply of relics at hand, he headed for Thuringen and worked there intensely to exterminate Paganism.

To our regret, we need also to report that he was equally preoccupied with driving out the priests and monks who had earlier been sent to this region by the old British church. He regarded the marriage of the clergy as prostitution, while their refusal to follow Roman customs with respect to baptism and Christian holy days in his eyes constituted heretical rebellion. That was because Boniface was Roman through and through. In 723, after diligently working in Hessen, Frisia and Thuringen, he traveled to Rome for the second time, where he openly and solemnly swore over the alleged grave of the Apostle Peter his strictest faithfulness to the so-called successor of this Apostle—the Roman Pope and the traditions of the Roman church.

Upon his return to Germany, he sadly observed that many of his converts had backslidden into Paganism. It was especially the worship of Thor, the Norwegian god of thunder, that attractedmany of them. Indignant and distressed, Boniface now went to Geismar near Fritzlar in Hessen, Germany. There stood a centuries-old oak tree that was dedicated to Thor. This oak was the central focus for the veneration of Thor. Whoever dared to desecrate this sacred tree, according to its adherents, would be struck dead by Thor's lightning rod. "I will demonstrate to you that your god is worthless," Boniface declared and in plain sight of thousands of Pagans, he attacked the root of the tree with his axe, which collapsed right there and then

with a thundering crash to the ground. To the amazement of the people, the missionary was not struck by the expected lightning rod. Bravely, there he stood with his axe facing the people. They believed his declaration that Thor and their entire religious idolatry was nothing but empty vanity. Like Israel of old, they called out loudly, "The Lord, He is God!" (I Kings 18:39). They now helped Boniface to build a small church with the wood of the tree.

Thousands were now baptized. News of these happenings reached England. With great enthusiasm crowds of Anglo-Saxons crossed the English Channel to support their compatriot in his mission.Many who stayed home, supported him with gifts as well as promises to pray for him in his battle. After struggling with the Pagans for a full decade, and with the old British church, the new Pope Gregory III rewarded him by appointing him archbishop of the entire German church.

This time Boniface accepted the appointment, even though he had previously refused to become the bishop of Utrecht as successor to Willibrord, probably because he desired a broader area of responsibilities. And that's what he now got. In his new position, he traveled throughout all of Germany, preached everywhere and founded congregations. He established areas that were largely Christianized as bishoprics. He sought to preempt backsliding into Paganism by an aggressive education programme among the people. He paid special attention to the youth by associating schools to the more prominent churches.

After he had received even more authority from the Pope, he organized a German Synod in 742. Later, he held two more such gatherings by means of which he brought about many positive

developments. The decisions of these Synods as well as other developments provide us with a clear insight into the state of the church of those times. Some priests were far from chaste. Some offered sacrifices to Jupiter, the supreme deity of the Romans, on behalf of the people. Some "Christians" sold their slaves to Pagans to be used as sacrifices. Horse meat and raw bacon were considered delicacies.[9]One priest understood Latin so poorly that he had baptized someone in the name of *Filia* (daughter) instead of *Filii* (Son).[10] Many bishops spent more time and energy on hunting and warfare than in the Lord's vineyard. A few taught the church father Origines' eschatological doctrine of the restoration of all things.[11]Thus there were many abuses that kept Boniface occupied and left him little time to devote to the conversion of Pagans.

This last, however, was constantly his favourite mission so that in his old age he decided to revive that passion and to devote himself completely to that goal. He appointed his student Lullus as his successor primate of the German church and as an old man of 70 he went to the northern Netherlands. He established his new home at Attingohemaan de Vecht.[12]From there he toured the land around Lake Almari[13].

---

[9]This translator is totally dumfounded at Beets' classifying the eating of horsemeat in the same category of sins with the sacrifice of slaves, sacrifices to Pagan gods and unchaste priests! The largely Christianized-but-now-secularized Dutch eat horsemeat even today; I was brought up with it. When our family arrived in Canada in 1951 and we learned of this distaste for horsemeat, we were completely taken by surprise. I have not overcome till this day—except, of course that the modern vegetarian movement has thrown another light on that subject, but that would affect all animals.

[10]Today this might not be considered ignorance so much as avant-garde theology, possible even with some in today's CRC!

[11]This statement, too, comes as a surprise. Today's Reformationals, adherents of Abraham Kuyper, a partial contemporary of Beets, mostly hold to some form of that doctrine. See Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Theology.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, p. 554.

[12]Beets is not sure of this place and wonders if this might be Achtteinhovenaan de Vecht. The Vecht is a tributary to the river Rhine, while Achttienhoven is a town in Utrecht, a province in the centre of the Netherlands as we

Everywhere thousands were won by the gray crusader for his Lord and for the Roman church. In the middle of 755, on June 5, he set up his tent in the heart of Frisia, near the town of Dokkum.[14] That day he was scheduled to serve his converts the Roman sacrament of confirmation. The sun barely appeared above the eastern horizon, when a huge crowd of Pagan Frisians showed up at rocket speed. His assistants wanted to defend him with their weapons. A bloodbath seemed unavoidable, but Boniface did not want that and ordered them to lay down their weapons. They did. Without any human protection the old man approached his enemies. With trembling voice but dignified posture he admonished them to repent. In vain. The brutes attacked and killed the missionary and all his companions—53 in all. Till this day the place where Boniface gave up his life as a martyr is called Murmerwoude (Moordwoud or Murder Forest). His remains were later buried at Fulda in Hesse, Germany.

Thus the Apostle to the German died. His death, however, was also the death of Paganism in Frisia. It died out gradually. In all of Germany, Boniface's legacy is considered a blessing till this day, even though, sadly, he was too attached as a servant to the Roman church.

Ludgerus, the First Great Frisian Missionary

The Dutch can boast of few great missionaries. Compared to England and Germany, they strike an impoverished figure at this front. It

---

know it today. "North" here does not refer to the current northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen, but to the current Netherlands as a whole in distinction from Belgium, which was at one time the southern Netherlands.

[13]Almari is an old name that later became Zuiderzee, a salt-water arm of the North Sea, which was later dammed in by the famous Afsluitdijk to become the fresh-water IJsel Meer or IJsel Lake.

[14]My wife was born only a few kilometres north of this city.

appears that there resides in our hearts little of the holy enthusiasm for mission as one finds among our related tribes. We should be thoroughly ashamed of this situation.

Nevertheless, there have been a few Dutch folk who became such missionaries, so that we still have reasons for pride and gratitude for them after all. The greatest among them, though not the most famous, is Ludger or Ludgerus, the first Frisian to become a great missionary.

He was born around 745 at Wierum, north of Dokkum. He lived there at the time Boniface fell victim to the Pagan Frisians at Murmerwoude in 755.[15] Most likely he saw and heard the Apostle to the Germans himself. In any case, he became Boniface's great successor in themission to the Frisians and their neighbours. However, neither he nor his parents were real converts of Boniface, for his grandparents already knew and served the Lord. They had thoroughly embittered King Radboud, because they wholeheartedly helped and supported the Christians whom he persecutedand impoverished, something their wealth and social status as nobles allowed them to do. Radboud wanted to kill them, but they escaped to France, where Ludger's father, Triatgrim, was born. Later, when Radboud II ruled Frisia, the family returned and so it was that our Ludger came to see the first light of day in Wierum, Frisia.

His parents intended him for the Lord's service and entrusted him early into the hands of Abbot Gregory of Utrecht, a pious and industrious man of French nobility to whom the Pope had assigned the task of converting the Frisians after Boniface's death. After

[15] He was five years old at the time.

preparatory studies, Ludger went to England and studied another ten years at York. One of his teachers there was the famous Alcuinus, who later served Charlemagne as teacher.[16]It appears that for some unknown reason there was friction between the English and the Frisians at York. In any case, an argument arose between the related tribesmen, which led Ludger to return to his fatherland. First, he was sent to the Saxons to preach the Gospel among them. After that, he was engaged for seven years with his own people, especially in the Dokkum area. He established a church where Boniface met his death. Then a war between the Saxons and the Franks prevented him from continuing and he left for Italy, where he spent most of his time in the Benedictine abbey at Monte Cassino. After some years, his piety and competence reached the ears of Emperor Charlemagne, who now made him return to Frisia and to the Saxons, who had in the meantime been largely won for Christ.

Between Ems and the Lauwer Sea, i.e. northern Groningen, he worked diligently to rebuild all that had been destroyed and to continue to plough and seed this still untamed field of labour. He talked to and with the Frisians both personally and publicly about the Way of Life. That sometimes yielded encouraging fruit. At Delfzijl, a harbourcity in north-eastern Groningen, he came upon a blind man, the singer Barnlef, a Pagan. "O," thought Ludger, "if only I could convert this man and then devote his voice to the Lord, how wonderful that would be." He had several conversations with Barnlef and prayed even more for him. And, yes, to his joy, Ludgerwas allowed to witness the conversion of this blind man, who from there on became a singer of the Gospel.

[16]Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church. New York: Charles Scribner, 1959, pp. 188-189,*

Shortly thereafter, Ludger had again to leave his beloved Frisia. The Saxons once again engaged Charlemagne in war, plundering and burning. Under the orders of his Emperor, this Frisian missionary now worked in Westphalia, western Germany. There he suffered and struggled for sixteen years as a faithful soldier of the Lord and won many for his Saviour. He established many churches and monasteries and even trained young men for the priesthood. Charlemagne rewarded him with the bishopric of Mimigarderode, later known as Munster, of which he was the first bishop. He preached till the day of his death. On Sunday, March 26, 809, he preached the gospel at two different places near Munster. That evening, upon his return home, utterly exhausted, he collapsed. A few hours later, he peacefully breathed his last breath.

He was buried under a nearby tree, as he had emphatically desired. It was under that tree that he preferred to pray during his last few years. According to legend, a miracle had taken place near that tree. Ludger had decided to build a monastery there, while it was still part of a dense forest. His students began to put the axe to the gigantic trees, but by the first evening they had felled only one. They complained bitterly about their heavy labour. How long would it not take them to cut all of them down? Ludger understood the difficulty. So, that night he went to pray under that particular tree for the Lord to help them in the task. And wonder of wonders, that same night a heavy storm rose up that felled all the trees in the area, except the one under which he prayed. Thus, no wonder that he selected this gigantic tree constantly for his chapel and wanted to be buried in its shadow. Well, we will leave that miracle to the world of legends together with other stories that tell us how the lame, blind and dumb

were healed by kneeling on his grave. Even without these embellishments we acknowledge him as a great missionary, whose work was richly blessed. All Frisians may rightly be proud of their compatriot who did so much for the Kingdom of the Lord! In fact, all of us may be thankful for him.