The Vikings were Norse (Scandinavian) explorers, warriors, merchants, and pirates who raided, explored and settled in wide areas of Europe and the North Atlantic islands from the late 8th to the mid-11th Century. Nobody could have predicted that these violent Vikings would become some of the most enthusiastic missionaries in Christianity.

The Viking raiders from pagan Scandinavia wreaked havoc throughout Europe. Throughout the 9th and 10th Centuries, Vikings raided, killed and plundered. Soon a new prayer was added to the Church liturgy: “From the fury of the Norsemen, O Lord, deliver us!”

At the time, probably nobody could have predicted that the violent Vikings would be conquered by the Prince of Peace (Jesus) and become some of the most enthusiastic missionaries in Christianity.

Ansgar, the apostle of the North

When the Vikings were the terror of Europe, God placed a great missionary burden on young Ansgar. With his own money, Ansgar redeemed several Danish youths who were slaves. He educated them to be his co-workers in bringing the Gospel to their countrymen.

Harald, King of Denmark, heard the Gospel in France and turned to Christ, submitting himself to being baptized. Ansgar eagerly joined the King to preach the Gospel to the Danes. At Hedeby, Ansgar built a small wooden church, but persecution forced him to flee the country. Ansgar narrowly escaped with his life when Norsemen burned the churches in Hamburg. Ansgar crossed the Baltic Sea to begin ministering in Sweden, on the way his vessel was plundered by pirates and they arrived destitute in Sweden, yet built the first church in the country.

At an assembly the question was debated as to whether the missionaries should be allowed to continue to preach Christ and so invite the anger of the Viking gods. An old Viking stood up and declared with great force that it was clear that the Christian God was stronger than Thor. This decided the matter and the missionaries received freedom to continue to preach the Gospel in Sweden.

The Scandinavian people were evangelized and discipled by the conviction that Christ is a mighty Victor who has risen triumphant over death. The power of Christ impressed the hardened Viking warriors. In twelve years old, the Tzar put a dozen ships under his command and sent him off into battle. By the time he was twenty-one years old, Olaf Tryggvesson was renowned as the ultimate Viking, tall, strong, handsome and unequalled in martial skill.

After devastating the Dutch and looting France, Olaf was converted to Christ in England. Olaf determined to avenge the death of his father: the exile of his mother, Norway, the King commanded his people to be converted to Christ or be prepared to die. However, in Denmark and Sweden the Vikings were converted through persuasion rather than force.

The ultimate Viking

Olaf Tryggvesson was the son of the King of Norway. His great grandfather, Harald Haartaker (Fair-hair), had initially established the Kingdom of Norway. When Olaf’s father was murdered in 996AD, Olaf fled the country with his mother. Vikings captured their ship and sold the boy into slavery. Olaf ended up in the court of Rurik’s Tzar Vladimir I, where he became a favorite of the Queen. When Olaf was just

Olaf was renowned as the ultimate Viking after devastating the Dutch and looting France. Yet even this brutish man bowed his knee to Christ.
The Vikings came to be convinced that the Christian God is more powerful than all other gods. They saw how He answered the prayers of the Christians. The prominence of the Cross in every Scandinavian flag serves as a dramatic testimony to the conversion of the Vikings.

was clear: repent or die! Those who chose to fight were quickly defeated by Olaf’s superior strength and skill. King Olaf declared that the heathen gods were demons; the powers behind the idols were evil spirits. All sorcerers, and those who promoted idolatry and heathenism, were to be banished. Those wizards and priests who resisted, year he had convinced everyone that Christ was greater than Thor and Odin.

Heathen sacrifice
At Trondheim, which had been the stronghold of the late heathen King Earl Haakon, Olaf burned the heathen temples and destroyed the idols. The local chiefs rose in rebellion against him. Olaf gave them a straight challenge: “Baptism or Battle!” He held eleven leaders hostage until everyone was baptised. At nearby Trondheim the local Chief ironbeard demanded that the king offer sacrifices. Olaf said he would make a sacrifice, walked into the temple and smashed the idol of Thor to pieces with his axe. He then killed ironbeard and persuaded the rest of the village to abandon their heathen ways and to be baptised as Christians.

After eradicating paganism in Norway, Olaf focused on winning Iceland and Greenland to Christ. In 1000AD King Olaf was killed in the spectacular sea battle of Svolv. Olaf died as courageously as he had lived, rejoicing that he had succeeded in his mission to convince the Vikings of Norway to abandon heathenism, to destroy their idols and to commit to following the Christian Faith.

Winning enemies to Christ
Another prominent Norwegian king who consolidated the Christian Faith in Norway was Olaf Haraldsson. In 1007, when he was just twelve years old, Olaf Haraldsson was sent out as a sea king to raid. Then Olaf had a traumatic spiritual experience and he saw a terrifying vision of Christ. Olaf abandoned his heathen ways and committed to being a Christian. In 1015AD he arrived in Norway and appointed himself king, proclaimed the Christian Faith and built numerous churches throughout Norway.

At Guibrandsdal, local pagans confronted him with their huge wooden idol of Thor. Olaf distracted them by drawing their attention to the bright sunrise behind them as a herald of his God. As his enemies turned to face the sunrise, one of Olaf’s warriors smashed the idol of Thor and revealed that its wood was rotten. As gold spilled out, large rats, which had evidently been living off the food offerings, scattered.

King Olaf pointed out that the gold they had wasted on offerings to Thor’s rotten idol would look far better as jewellery on their wives and daughters! This demonstration of Christ’s superiority over Thor convinced the locals to be baptised. They who met as enemies, parted as friends.

The vikings surrender to Christ
And so, by a combination of pioneer missionary work, royal favour and combat, the ferocious Vikings were convinced to abandon heathenism, destroy their idols, abate their aggression, cease their violent raids, submit to baptism and commit to following the Christian Faith.

The Vikings came to be convinced that the Christian God is more powerful than all other gods. They saw how He answered the prayers of the Christians. They witnessed miracles. They watched as Christians were able to destroy idols and defy the heathen gods - without suffering any ill effects. They noted that their pagan gods were powerless before the all powerful Jesus Christ. Christ was honoured and worshipped as the Mighty Warrior who had triumphed over all the powers of death, hell and the grave. He is the risen ascended Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, with all other authorities in subjection to Him.

“Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him.” Psalm 72:11

Today, the prominence of the Cross in every Scandinavian flag serves as a dramatic testimony to the conversion of the Vikings.