



*Ruins of the Christian colony at Iona which for two centuries was the centre of education in Western Europe.*

## *How Britain Preserved the Ancient Faith*

A FURTHER INSTALMENT OF "HOW THE GOSPEL CAME TO BRITAIN"

We saw in our last article how the Roman church had raised tradition to the level of, or even above, the Scriptures as a source of doctrine and authority, while the early British church still adhered to the Word of God as the full and sufficient rule of faith and life.

### *Giving the Bible to the Common People*

A further contrast between the two churches is manifest in their respective attitudes to the dissemination of the written Word. Rome maintained its hold upon the common people by withholding the Bible from them and making them dependent entirely upon the priests for a knowledge of the way of salvation, a method which also enabled them to add to or detract from the

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Word without fear of contradiction.

The leaders of the British church, on the other hand, believed that the Bible should be available in the language of the people so that all might read for themselves the Word of life. As early as the fourth century, Chrysostom tells us that the British church had its own version of the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, no early British (English) Bible manuscript seems to have come down to us on account of the devastating thoroughness of the Anglo-Saxon ravages, and only a few examples of British work in Wales are known. The Irish scribes, however, were not sub-

jected to such ruthless persecution, and a number of their manuscripts have been preserved. Many are written with beautiful regularity, and with decorative features of a most elaborate kind, which must have necessitated months or even years of work.

An early Irish version is seen in the Dommach-Avigid in the Royal Irish Academy. It is quoted in the writings of Fastidius and Patrick of the fifth century and in those of Cummanus and Adamnan of the seventh. Apparently it continued in use as late as the ninth century, for the quotations of Nennius and Asser about that time also correspond with it.

A fifth-century translation of the gospels is to be found in the



Trinity College Library, Dublin. There is also there a copy of the Book of Durrow, dating from the seventh century, and said to be the work of Columba.

Columba was perhaps the greatest of the scribes of the early Irish church and was engaged in preparing a copy of the psalter at the time of his death. Baithene, his successor, completed this copy and is also credited with producing one in which the only fault was the omission of a dot over an "i"!

The Irish Bible scribes were held in very high regard and injury to them was punished most severely.

#### *British Church Rejects Apocrypha*

The basis of the first British and Irish versions was the Old Latin Bible of the Western world, but many of the British scholars so mastered the Greek, and even the Hebrew, language that they were able to correct the Latin version from manuscripts in the original tongues. And what is even more significant, they omitted from their vernacular Bibles the spurious apocryphal books of the Old Latin version which had been accepted by the Roman church!

Not only did the scribes of the Brito-Irish church zealously copy the Word of God in the language of the people, but they studied and expounded it to the people with equal diligence.

#### *Preaching and Teaching*

Wherever a monastery or Christian colony was established, a teaching staff was installed and students were attracted in great numbers. At Bangor-Iscoed in North Wales there were regularly over two thousand students.

With the destruction of the British schools by the Saxon invaders those of Ireland came into prominence and for centuries were famous throughout

the whole of Europe. The names given to Ireland, "the Isle of Saints" and "the University of the West," testify to the piety and learning of its inhabitants.

At Cuana's monastery there were over 1,700 pupils and Larrain had more than 1,500. Clonard in County Meath at the beginning of the sixth century was one of the most famous educational centres of the period, the usual number of pupils being about 3,000. Manual labour, devotional exercises, study of languages including Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, science, the Scriptures, and ecclesiastical literature, comprised the curriculum. On one occasion Senach tells that he was sent by Finian to see how the pupils were engaged. He came back with the word that "some are employed in manual labour, some are studying the Scriptures, and others, especially Columba of Tirs-da-Glas, are engaged in prayer."

So great did the reputation of the Irish schools become that in later years even the French resorted thither. Dagobert II of France received his education at Slane in County Meath and the French bishop, Agilbert, also resided for a considerable time in Ireland to study the Scriptures. Kings Aldfrith and Oswy of Northumbria as well as bishops Egbert, Ethelbun, Chad, and Willibrord were all educated in Ireland.

Bede tells us that many of the converted Saxons resorted thither:

"Either for the sake of sacred studies, or a more ascetic life; some of them devoted themselves to a monastic life, others chose rather to apply themselves to study, going from one master's cell to another. The Scots [Irish] willingly received them all, and took care to supply them with daily food without cost, as also to furnish them with books for their studies, and teaching them free of

charge."—*Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, sec. 27.

An extensive literature was produced by the learned Brito-Irish church, which, however, has now all but disappeared. One Irish teacher of the seventh century, named Augustine, is notable for the production of two treatises, one on "Wonders of Scripture" and another on "Difficulties of Scripture," which gave evidence of such learning and wisdom that they were attributed to the pen of the great Augustine of Hippo. The canon he accepted was the same as our Protestant canon and not that of the Latin church.

#### *Absence of Ritualism*

The forms of worship among the early British Christians were simple, and corresponded with those of the church of the second, third, and early fourth centuries, during which period British bishops had been represented on the early church councils on faith and order. They knew nothing of the elaborate ritualism and the changes which had been introduced in later centuries by Rome. When the British and Roman churches came into contact during the sixth and seventh centuries the former church was still computing the date of Easter after the fashion of the early church, and still using the ceremony of single baptism by immersion in the name of the triune God instead of the threefold immersion practised by Rome.

#### *Apostolic Organization*

In organization, too, the British church corresponded closely with the apostolic and early church. Each tribe had its own church in the charge of a bishop or elder. These local churches were self-governing, yet in brotherly contact with those in other districts. The leaders of the



larger or older established churches were looked to with respect for counsel and guidance, but not as having any intrinsically higher authority. The ecclesiastical organization of the Latin church was entirely absent.

Scattered over the country were numerous centres or "monasteries" to which we have previously referred. These must not, however, be confused with the institutions of the same name which grew up in mediæval times, from which they were entirely different both in purpose and conduct.

The Latin principle was isolation and separation from the world, primarily for safety and for spiritual development, and only secondarily for the good of others. The British monastery was in no way a place of isolation, but was essentially a missionary and educational centre for the tribe, with church, school, and houses in which the missionaries lived with their families.

The occupants were not bound by the Roman ordinance of celibacy and were free to come and go as they chose. Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, as we have noted, was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest. They sustained themselves from the products of the land which they tilled around the monastery and spent the rest of their time teaching those who came for instruction, and preaching the Gospel among the surrounding peoples.

When pioneering into new places a group of missionaries secured a small portion of land within the territory of the tribe they desired to reach and there established one of these Christian colonies. Living a life of purity, holiness, and self-denial before the surrounding pagans, and practising charity and bene-

volence where opportunity occurred, they won their respect. Then they went forth among them preaching the doctrines and the pure morality of the Gospel and drawing the youth to the monastery for religious and cultural instruction. When the monastery was fully established it would send out groups to other places, where a similar work was begun.

Thus the British monasteries were not like the unscriptural places of seclusion of later times, but were centres of Christian influence like the mission stations in heathen lands to-day.

In later times the idea of seclusion did develop, and as Roman influence gained power the monasteries were modified after the Latin type until eventually they became entirely Romanized. But it was centuries before the rule of celibacy was completely enforced.

#### *Religious Liberty*

As indicated by their church organization the British church believed in liberty of conscience and was bound together not by the bonds of ecclesiastical authority but by the ties of Christian love and a common faith.

This liberty they exemplified in their relations with all men. In their missionary activities they did not, like Rome, seek to coerce men to accept the Gospel but drew them by the constraining power of love. And they worked for men as individuals, not gathering them into the church *en masse*.

Without doubt the Emperor Constantine the Great in his early life had become imbued with the spirit of liberty which characterized the British church, for we find that his first religious decree, the Edict of Milan, was a model of Christian free-

dom: "We grant," it stated, "both to the Christians and to all men, free liberty to follow the religion which each man has chosen." It is sad to note, however, that he did not hold to this principle in subsequent years of his life.

When the emissaries of Rome approached the leaders of the British church to compel them to accept the primacy of the Pope, it was only natural that they should offer a most strenuous resistance. For not only were the doctrines and practices of Latin Christianity foreign to them, but the methods of Rome were the very antithesis of their conception of the church of God.

As Cadvan, prince of Wales, said to the abbot of Bangor, in discussing the British position:

"All men may hold the same truths, yet no man thereby be drawn into slavery to another. If the Cymry believed all that Rome believes, that would be as strong reason for Rome obeying us as for us to obey Rome. It suffices for us that we obey the truth. If other men obey the truth, are they therefore to become subject to us? Then were the truth of Christ made slavery unto men and not freedom."

Better would it have been for England had the simple faith of the early British church lived on. But its very simplicity and its abhorrence of coercion and force made it no match for the highly-developed, complex, and powerful organization of Rome, with the result that during the centuries which followed the landing of Augustine the native church fought an heroic but steadily losing battle against the usurper, until at last the primitive church had been entirely superseded by the ecclesiastical system of Rome.

(Concluding Article: "The Eclipse of Britain's Early Church and the Protestant Revival.")