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The saintly Columba was a Bible Christian and his great instrument of conversion was the Word of God.

How Britain Preserved the Ancient Faith

PART VII OF "HOW THE GOSPEL CAME TO BRITAIN"

By *W. L. Emmerson*

THE conflict which arose when the native British church came into contact with the Latin church of Rome on the Continent and in this country leads us to inquire in what way the two differed from each other.

We know that they disagreed as to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. We know also that they must have differed in doctrine and practice, for the British missionaries were everywhere denounced as heretics and false teachers. But seeing that in the Roman church the accretions of heathenism and pagan philosophy had well-nigh obscured the fundamentals of the Gospel, we may well ask whether British teaching was really heretical, or whether it was not rather the ancient faith, preserved through the centuries in an out-of-the-way corner of Europe, coming into contact with the so-called Christianity of an apostate church.

Our information on this question is unfortunately very fragmentary, first, because of the vandalism of the pagan Angles and Saxons who, as we have seen, carried fire and sword through the land, destroying everything in their path; and

secondly, because of the pertinacity with which the later Romish usurpers destroyed every remnant they could find of the Celtic church.

Yet in spite of all the obstacles to preservation some documents have come down to us, which indicate that the early British church did shine forth with a purity and a piety in striking contrast to the errors, the superstitions, and the idolatry of Rome.

The Bible Only

British Christianity was founded not upon the word of the priests and the writings of the Fathers, but upon the Word of the living God.

We have already mentioned the statement of Chrysostom in A.D. 402 that,

"Though thou shouldst go to the ocean, to the British Isles, there thou shouldst hear all men everywhere discoursing matters out of the Scriptures."

Patrick carried the Scriptures to the Irish people and preached Christ mightily to individual hearts. His *Confession* abounds in scriptural references. Some Roman Catholic authorities have claimed that he taught many of the modern doctrines of Rome,

but this is contradicted by his extant writings. He everywhere appealed to Scripture as the only ground and test of Christian doctrine. Never does he refer to tradition as a source of authority.

In a hymn composed when about to appear before the chiefs of Tarah, the oldest piece of Irish literature in existence, he prays:

"At Temur to-day may the strength of God support me, may the power of God preserve me, may the wisdom of God instruct me, may the Word of God render me eloquent."

And again:

"Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ after me, Christ in me, Christ my right, Christ my left, Christ in the heart of every one I speak to, Christ in every mouth that speaks to me, Christ in every ear that hears me."

There is no appeal to Mary, to angels, or to departed saints, but to the power of God alone.

Patrick did not teach the doctrine of purgatory which is so fundamental a part of Roman doctrine. And celibacy found no place in his gospel for, as we know, he himself was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest. Nor did auricular confession and papal infallibility form any part of his creed.

Columba a Bible Christian

Columba, the apostle of Scotland, was also a Bible Christian. Writing on one occasion respecting the doctrine of the trinity he laid down very definitely the principle:

"Except what has been declared by the law, the prophets, the evangelists, and apostles, a profound silence ought to be observed by all others on the subject of the trinity."—*Lib. iii.*

Adamnan, his ninth successor at Iona, says that his preaching and his great instrument of conversion was the Word of God.

At his death, which is described in detail by Adamnan, there was no thought of extreme unction or of absolution, "no crucifix held up to his eyes, no masses said, no fear of purgatorial fires; but on his part, perfect peace, and on theirs [his friends] resignation and thanksgiving."

Writing of the piety of the early Scottish Christians, G. Grub, in his *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, says:

"The reverence in which they held the sacred volume, the attention with which they studied its pages and the diligence and fervour with which they strove to conform their lives to its precepts are well known. . . . The Bible was their daily study and constant meditation, and it was their business and delight to impart its sacred treasures to all who came to them for instruction."

What Rome Denounced as Heresy

The records we have of Roman opposition to the British missionaries in Europe testify to the biblical character of their teachings in contrast with the traditional authority of Rome.

Columbanus, the first of the pioneers who went out from Iona to spread the Gospel on the Continent, when asked who he and his companions were, replied:

"We are Irish dwelling at the

very ends of the earth. We be men who receive naught but the doctrine of the evangelists and apostles. The catholic faith, as it was first delivered by the successors of the holy apostles, is maintained among us with unchanged fidelity."

When taken to task by Pope Gregory for refusing to accept the authority of the church, he closed his reply with the words:

"And now, if as I hear, you are prepared to give me this answer, that what is established by the authority of antiquity cannot be altered—certainly error can lay claim to antiquity, but the truth which condemns it is always of higher antiquity still."

The tradition of the church, if contrary to the teaching of the Word, commanded no respect in the mind and heart of the zealous Columbanus.

Boniface, the Roman missionary to Bavaria and Central Europe in the early eighth century, denounced the British missionaries as false prophets, seducers of the people, idolaters, and adulterers. But when the list of concrete charges against one of them, Clement the Scot, are examined they are found to be his belief in the sole authority of Scripture, the freedom of the church, and the right to marry. If these were heresy and false doctrine what was Rome's conception of truth?

A Catholic Admission

Bede bears testimony to the pure, spiritual character of the early British church and contrasts it with shame and reluctance with the Roman communion to which he belonged. He states that while Asia, Africa, and Europe were overrun with false doctrines the church in Britain grew up and covered the whole nation untrammelled for four centuries by any root of bitterness. Surely a splendid tribute to the deep and faith-

fully-laid foundations of the master-builders.

It may be said that Pelagius, the originator of the Pelagian controversy which raged throughout Western Europe for many centuries, was a Briton, but it should also be noted that he held no heretical views until after he had left this country. And it was because of his beautiful Christian character that his views gained such a hold. When the Pelagian heresy was brought to England it was strenuously combated by the British church.

Early British Church Observed Seventh-Day Sabbath

There are a number of evidences which indicate that the church in Britain for centuries observed the seventh-day Sabbath of the early church and not the first day of the week as enforced by Rome. The account of the death of Columba indicates that he knew and observed the true Sabbath, for among his last words to Diermit his disciple on Saturday, the ninth of June, he said:

"This day is called the Sabbath, that is the day of rest, and such will it truly be to me; for it will put an end to my labours."—*Buller's "Lives of the Saints," Article, "St. Columba."*

Andrew Lang attests the fact that the Celtic church held fast to the Sabbath of Jehovah:

"They worked," he says, "on Sunday, but kept Saturday in a sabbatical manner."—*"History of Scotland," I, 96.*

And it was not until the time of the Catholic queen, Margaret, in the eleventh century, that this practice was uprooted and the Scottish church brought into complete uniformity to Rome.

W. T. Skene finds traces in the early church of Ireland also of the observance of the seventh day as the Sabbath.

We should not, of course, form a right idea of the Christi-

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anity of Britain in these early days if we were to imagine that it was the absolutely pure and unadulterated doctrine of the apostles. Although Britain had been preserved through the years from the later grievous errors which had grown up in the Roman church it had its share of the errors which had crept into the church in the earliest days, before the barbarian invasions had isolated Britain from the rest of Christendom. Thus they had come to regard the table of the Lord as an altar and the communion as a sacrifice in which there was inherent merit, though they had no defined doctrine concerning it, and they adhered to the biblical practice of taking both of the bread and the wine, not withholding the latter from laymen as in Roman ritual. The pastors of the church were wrongly looked upon as priests, and they themselves adopted the unscriptural practice of shaving their heads. But this was not in the approved Roman style, as is shown by Augustine's demand that the British bishops should modify their tonsure to conform with the requirements of the Latin church.

Yet allowing for these and other errors which had crept very early into Christian belief the British church was free from all the ecclesiasticism of Rome and steadily adhered, as best they knew, to the principle of the Bible and the Bible only as the only source of doctrine and authority.

(To be continued.)