

The British Church Amongst The Witnesses



This is the continuation of [The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.](#)

Note: This lecture is not taken from the Horae Apocalypticae, but is deemed advisable as a continuation of Church history.

HAVING, in the preceding lectures, confined our view of the Witnesses to the twofold Eastern and Western lines, illustrated in the history of the Paulikian, Waldensian, and other confessors of Christ, it may be interesting to us as English readers to digress from the direct course of Apocalyptic inquiry, and examine what may have passed during the long period reviewed by us in the religious history of our own country.

In our primary lecture we alluded to the fact that Popery was not the first form of Christianity introduced into England, but that previously there existed an Apostolic Church in these islands; and that consequently the Reformation was but the rooting out of those noxious weeds which had overrun and all but choked the plant of true Christianity.

We have already supposed that St. John, from his lonely isle, taking a survey of the religious state of the surrounding world, might have seen a tinge of light on his distant horizon, which had told him that Britain had received the Gospel, and might already be numbered amongst the rising Churches.

The first introduction of Christianity in all probability was effected early in the apostolic times, and, as such, partook of primitive purity and simplicity. Some time previous to the birth of Christ, Julius Caesar had by conquest opened an intercourse with Britain and numbered it amongst the provinces of the Roman Empire. A door was thus providentially opened, which doubtless the missionary zeal of early Christians was not slow to take advantage of. Whether Thomas or Paul first preached the Gospel here is a point undecided; but tradition more usually attributes it to the former. Eusebius merely states that "some of the apostles crossed the ocean to the British Isles." Certain it is that there are sufficient notices on record that Christianity had made considerable progress as early as the middle of the second century.

A.D. 167. – The venerable Bede, whose Church History is well known in our own

days, records that a British king called Lucius was in this year converted, and exerted himself for the dissemination of the Scriptures, which, we are also told by Prideaux, were in use in A.D. 168.

A.D. 234. – Origen writes: "The power of God our Saviour is even with them in Britain, shut out from our world." A similar observation was made by Tertullian of places of the British Isles inaccessible to the Romans, but which had become subject to the dominion of Christ; and by Chrysostom, "that even the British Isles have felt the power of the Word, for there too Churches have been raised up."

Of the consideration to which the British Church had attained at an early part of the fourth century, an evidence appears in that its bishops appeared as deputies at several of the councils. Thus at Nice, A.D. 325, in the reign of Constantine, we find a British bishop; also at Sardica in the year 347, and at Ariminum in 359. But perhaps a still surer test of its progress is in the circumstance of its having been called to endure persecution. Thus, at the beginning of the fourth century, in the reign of Diocletian, thousands of the British perished; – amongst others St. Alban. And what persecution had begun the Saxon invasion well-nigh finished. Dean Waddington says of the year 542, "The Saxons almost swept Christianity from Britain."

A.D. 432. – But the truth, while it declined in England, flourished in the sister island. Succathus, better known as St. Patrick, was educated and consecrated bishop (it is believed) in France. He appears about this time, as an Irish bishop, to have founded the See of Armagh, which has ever since continued as the Primacy. His missionary labors, with the assistance of many who united with him in the work, were crowned with success; the Church was enlarged, and numerous bishoprics and churches were founded. Though in later days erroneously supposed to have been a maintainer of the superstitions of the Romish Church, his "Confessions" show that he held the pure faith of the Gospel, and he specially enforced the importance of making the Holy Scriptures the foundation of Christian doctrine. He died in A.D. 492.

Many other preachers and missionaries are reborded as laboring during this century; in the latter part of which, a Briton, named Pelagius, is said to have introduced opinions which still bear his name, and which deny the inheritance of ' a sinful nature from Adam. From this heresy, which for a long time troubled the British Church, one good at least arose; inasmuch as it led to the establishment of schools for instructing the people in the nature of the true religion.

One eminent man, Columba, was long remembered in these isles. After having founded many churches in Ireland, he preached as a missionary in Scotland, up to that period in Pagan darkness. There he founded a college in Iona, or Icolmkill, near the Isle of Mull, which was resorted to for education until the eighth century, and then destroyed by the Danes. The ruins still remain, and were surrounded with a wall by the Duke of Argyll about fifty years since. Columba made copies of the Scriptures, and circulated them; insisting in his preaching " that they must be held as the rule of faith." He died in A.D. 551.

During this sixth century there were good men and bishops also in Wales, amongst whom St. David of Caerleon and Julius were preeminent. Pelagianism, Arianism, and superstition had not left these British Churches altogether untouched; but we have no proof as to what extent they were infected.

In A.D. 635 we read that Oswald, king of Northumbria, sent to Scotland for teachers to instruct his people in religion. Accordingly Aidan, a Scotch bishop, who had been educated in Ireland, fixed his residence at Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, off the coast of Northumberland, accompanied by two of his countrymen. It was by their means that the North of England was evangelized. That which now constitutes the diocese of London was Christianized by the exertions of a British bishop called Chad. In fact, every county from Edinburgh to London, Norfolk and Suffolk excepted, owes the first light of the Gospel to the ancient British Church, independently of all connection with Rome.

It was about the year 570, while a pure doctrine was being extensively preached in Ireland, as also in Wales by Kentigern and Asaph, that Bertha, a Christian princess of France, was married to Ethelbert, king of Kent. Under her influence, when Augustine, a Romish missionary from Pope Gregory, arrived in this country, the king received him favorably. This was the first introduction of Popery into England. Augustine came in the full pomp of Papal authority: a crucifix was carried before him, and twenty monks waited on him with devotion. The king of Kent was baptized, and 10,000 of the people were in one day admitted by the same sacrament into the nominal Church of Christ. After establishing the Romish religion at the Kentish court, Augustine went through the country, endeavoring, with zeal worthy of a better cause, to convert the inhabitants, and to bring their clergy and bishops into union with Rome. Towards Wales the Popish missionary bent his course, and on his way stopped for some time at Worcester, where he called a synod. It is said that several English bishops were present, and they silently waited for Augustine to begin. After some deliberation he demanded with a haughty air, "Whether they were prepared to concede three points to Rome? First, that Easter should be kept as at Rome; secondly, that baptism should be according to the Romish ritual; thirdly, that there should be a union with the Popish missionaries in preaching to the Angles."

To these demands the English bishops replied that they were willing to render equal submission to the Pope as to any godly person; but that they were under the Bishop of Chester as their overseer, "to cause us," they said, "to keep the way spiritual."

The irritated missionary revenged the insult when opportunity served. He stirred up the king of Northumbria against them. A battle ensued, and 2000 of the British clergy were massacred on one occasion, surrounded with their flocks, who tried to defend them; the clergy, by prayers and exhortations, encouraging them to hold out to the last.

The bad leaven introduced by the monk Augustine rapidly worked its way, and Southern England, with but few exceptions, joined Rome. Although much might have been wrong in practice before he came, the Bible had been nevertheless upheld as the standard of faith. But thenceforward the adoration of images,

saints, and relies, with all the other marks of apostasy, began by degrees to be visible in England's churches.

In A.D. 854, King Ethelwulf, hoping thereby to win the favor of Heaven, settled a pension on the Pope out of the royal domains; and would have given over himself, his kingdom, and people to the same control, had not his subjects risen up indignantly and dethroned him. This gave a check to the Romish encroachments; and Alfred the Great succeeding, refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope, and disallowed all the Papal pretensions. He read the Scriptures himself, and wished them to be read by the people. One error he made, however, in the case of Oxford, which from an early date had been a seat of learning. The Saxons having pillaged and burnt it, King Alfred rebuilt several of the colleges, but unfortunately introduced the Romish monk, Grimbold, as a professor, which caused much dissension, and the latter was obliged finally to retire. Until then the university was uninfected by Popery, but from that time it partook of the general corruption.

William the Conqueror, in like manner, withstood the claims of Rome's supremacy. When summoned to do homage for his kingdom, he declared that he held it from God and by his own sword.

When William Rufus came to the throne, though he rejected Popish interference, he hesitated not to sell the vacant benefices, bishoprics, and abbeys to the highest bidder.

At length, in the reign of Henry II., the triumph of Rome was complete. Having quarreled with Thomas a Becket and degraded him from his archbishopric of Canterbury, the latter appealed to the Pope and fled from England. Henry at first renounced the Pope's authority and resisted his interference. But when, on the assassination of Becket, the kingdom was placed under an interdict, the king made full submission, and was reconciled to Rome.

The following degrading humiliations to which the king of England submitted make us turn with indignation against Popish assumption, the more in the ascendant ever the more intolerant and mean in its tyranny. Some of the conditions on which absolution was obtained were these: – 1st, Never to oppose the Pope's will; 2ndly, never to hinder appeals to Rome; 3rdly, to unite in the crusade to the Holy Land; 4thly, to restore the property taken from the clergy. Further, to walk barefoot in the tomb of Becket, there to receive on his bare shoulders five stripes from each of the five prelates, and three stripes with knotted cords from each of the eighty monks of Canterbury. He was then required to kneel on the cold stones for the length of a day and night clothed in sackcloth. To all this Henry yielded; and thus the monarchy and Church of England, after upwards of a thousand years' struggle, became part and parcel of Papal Rome.

The Papal triumph was still incomplete while Ireland remained unconquered and free in government and religion. The Church there had long kept up a protest against Rome's pretensions, and the Sacred Scriptures were freely read. Bishop Bede (who afterwards translated the Bible) says in his History, "That the knowledge of Latin was kept up in that country by the meditation of the Scriptures."

Henry having resolved to add Ireland to his dominions, the Pope readily gave his sanction. We have seen before that, as Vicar of Christ, he deemed himself entitled to give any part of the world to whom he pleased. Pope Adrian IV. therefore thus writes in A.D. 1172 to Henry of England: – “Adrian, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to our well-beloved son in Christ, the illustrious king of the English, etc. ...Your highness, in contemplating the laudable design of gaining fame on earth and augmenting the recompense of bliss awaiting you in heaven... We cannot but hope success will attend your mission. Certainly there is no doubt but that Ireland, and all the islands on which the Sun of Righteousness hath shined, do belong of right to St. Peter, and the holy Roman Church: for which reason we are the more induced to introduce into them a holy stock, etc., etc. ...You have signified your desire to enter Ireland, and your willingness to pay St. Peter an annual tribute of one penny for every house there, and to preserve the ecclesiastical rights of the land uninjured, etc.” Then follow good wishes for success, concluding thus: “That you may so obtain a higher recompense from God, and upon earth a name of glory to all generations.”

The story is well known how Henry conquered the country. and returned not to England until the Irish Church, long since deteriorated and fast waning in light and truth, had been formally made over to the Church of Rome. The priesthood, infected with superstitions introduced by Popish emissaries from England, were but too ready to betray their trust; and having convened a synod, agreed to yield the required submission. Whereupon the Pope wrote a letter of congratulation to the Irish bishops, in which he declared himself “thankful to God, who had granted such a noble victory to his dearly beloved son in Christ, the king of England.”

Years passed on, and for nearly two centuries no protesting cry was publicly heard against Popery. Rich and poor, laics and churchmen, were devoted to the building of churches; and monasteries, nunneries, abbeys, convents, and cathedrals studded the kingdom. The reason and conscience of the nation, it might be said, were enslaved.

In the beginning of the fourteenth century a cry rose from Oxford of loud Opposition, the echo of which died not away until it was lost in the still louder-raised voice of opposition to Popery at the Reformation. Edward III. of England demurred to the Pope’s asserted right of naming the clergy to fill the vacant benefices, and refused to do him the homage that John had consented to render. JOHN WICKLIFFE, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, had supported the king by writing in favor of his views. On his return from a personal interview with the Pope’s Legate, he boldly proclaimed the Pope to be the man of sin spoken of in Scripture, and denounced him as Antichrist.

Wickliffe was accused of heresy, and again and again the University received the Pope’s order to deliver him up. On its repeated refusal, Wickliffe fearlessly appeared at St. Paul’s, where a council had been summoned to condemn him. But the council suddenly broke up, and no sentence was pronounced. A spark of inquiry, however, had been struck, and persecution fanned it into flame.

Wickliffe translated the Bible, and copies in manuscript were circulated; but

though the price was too high for the middle and lower classes, this did not stop the progress of truth. A load of hay, or its worth, was not unfrequently given for even a small portion of the Holy Book.

Ever jealous of the circulation of God's Word, Popery opposed its progress by all possible means. In vain. The people had begun to feel its value; and, hiding the pages, used to meet together at night to read it in secret.

After withstanding all the endeavors of the enemies of truth to crush him, Wickliffe was allowed to retire in old age to Lutterworth, and there died. The doctrines of the Lollards, now identified with his followers, continued to take root and spread; his writings also circulated and were translated.

In the subsequent persecution which raged against these witnesses, A.D. 1399, many were burnt alive, – amongst others Lord Cobham. Inquisitors being sent to Oxford with special orders to destroy all the books of the heretics, numbers of these were found and committed to the flames. But while the wrath of man was destroying, the providence of God was preparing a new means of advancing the circulation of His Word; and the art of printing, from its first invention, gave a mighty impulse to the cause of the Gospel. No sooner had the Reformation begun to move the minds of men in Germany, than its doctrines were openly professed also in England. Persecution revived, and the fires of Smithfield blazed again and again around God's faithful martyrs. But the spirit of resistance to Roman tyranny was by God's goodness implanted in the breasts of our countrymen; and the throwing off of the Papal yoke was the first national evidence of that Christian liberty which has been at once the glory and safeguard of Britons.

The Reformation might be said to have been finally accomplished when the people were enabled to approach God in public worship in a language which they could understand, and when a liturgy was adopted which, retaining a form of sound words, directed the worshipper to the inspired volume, as to the source from which it in spirit derived its origin and excellence. The Book of Common Prayer was compiled, partly indeed from whatever little was found Scriptural in the Roman Missal, but still more from the Ancient British Liturgy, and from the spiritual writings of the German Reformers. Thus, purified and refreshed from the corrupt inventions of Papal priestcraft and the incrustations of dark superstition, pure Christianity shone forth again, – had free course and' was glorified. The prediction of the divine revelation was fulfilled; and England ceased to be numbered among the ten kingdoms of the great Apostasy.

Before we close our notice of the witnessing Churches, it may be well to remark that there were other parts of the world in which, while they cannot be included amongst our lines of witnesses, being beyond the pale of Romish usurpation, there yet were to be found, not only individuals and families, but even communities and regularly formed Churches, which would appear to have from a very ancient date held fast the pure truths of Christian doctrine. As an instance of this, we know that a large Church existed in India at the end of the fifteenth century, with its congregations and pastors, its sacred buildings and pure sacraments, which never had, at any time, connection with the Church of Rome. The number of these Syrian

Christians then amounted to 300,000 souls.

Upon the discovery of the Malabar coast and the landing of the Portuguese, the latter proceeded to claim these churches and countries for their own, in the name of the Pope and by virtue of a deed of gift from him. The asserted pretensions of an ecclesiastical potentate of whom they had never before heard was at once resisted by the whole body. Their own apostolic orders they considered as derived from the Apostle Thomas; – a tradition which subsequent researches seem to confirm. Their manuscripts are evidently of great antiquity.

It was not long ere the usual means for forcing submission to the Papacy were largely brought to bear on this simple people. The burning of their books, persecution to the death, and finally, the establishment of the Inquisition at Goa, at length affected to a small extent the required obedience. Nevertheless, at a Council held A.D. 1599, at Diamper, near Cochin, the following, among other particulars, were laid to their charge:- – That they received no images; that their priests had wives; that they acknowledged but two sacraments; that they neither invoked the saints nor believed in purgatory.

Dr. Buchanan, in his “Researches,” about the beginning of the present century, gives a full and interesting account of these Christians. Albeit the leaven of superstition has worked much mischief among them, they have continued, as a Church, to maintain their independence.

Continued in [Revelation 12:1-17. The Great Red Dragon](#)

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