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The Pictish Church, a Victim of Garbled History

By F. R. WEBBER

It seems almost incredible that a powerful evangelical religious body could flourish for almost five centuries and then be all but forgotten. Moreover, it was a denomination possessed of a form of missionary zeal that puts us to shame today; a denomination that maintained a number of powerful training schools from which Christian missionaries were sent out to evangelize the pagans; and (if we are to believe the earliest historians) a religious body that preached Christ Crucified with apostolic fervor. Such, we are assured by painstaking historians, was the early Celtic Church. The Celtic Church, like our larger religious bodies today, was composed of several closely related divisions, not always practicing pulpit and altar fellowship with one another. Everybody is familiar with the Iro-Picts—but how much did any of us know, until comparatively recent years, of the Gaidhealic Church as it really was or the Brito-Pictish Church or any other such related bodies?

Historians knew in a general way that such a church body existed, and careful historians realized that it was not only separate from Rome, but an unconformed rival of Rome. Its methods differed sharply, for Rome extended her influence by means of permanent congregations as well as by monastic foundations. The Picts and Gaidheals, on the contrary, looked upon the preaching mission as the important thing. By preaching mission they meant, of course, the system used centuries later by George Whitefield and John Wesley, where preachers were trained and then sent out to preach wherever they could find hearers: in the market place, in the open fields, at fairs, or wherever people were gathered. Rome stressed organization, whereas the Picts and the Gaidheals were content to sow the seed of the Word. They trained powerful preachers in their *muinntirs*, or missionary training centers, and if local congregations grew up as a result of the preaching of such

men, well and good. If not, these early preachers, in true apostolic fashion, shook the dust from their feet and made their way to the next town. Even their centers of activity differed radically from those of Rome, for monastic life in the Roman sense was unknown among the Celts. Their form of church government was based upon the Celtic clan system and not upon a hierarchy. Popular encyclopedias and reference books continue to repeat the absurd statements that the *muinntirs* of the Celtic Church were "monasteries," and they speak of Pictish bishops as though they were diocesan prelates, forgetting that such a thing as a diocese was unknown among the Picts, and rather distasteful in the extreme, because it was in conflict with their familiar clan system. The so-called bishop among the Picts and Gaidheals was a minor cleric who was subject to a superintendent, called by the Celts an *ab*, a word borrowed from the Syrian Church and meaning, freely translated, merely a housefather.

Then why is so little said about the Pictish Church and the Church of the Gaidheals, to mention the two most important groups among the Celts? It is simply because the true history of these churches has been so thickly veneered with foolish legends of later times, hearsay accounts, and deliberate garbling of history that less than a century ago the whole subject was one of utmost confusion. Why was their true history garbled? For one reason, the Picts and the Gaidheals, although fellow Celts, were rival church groups and held strictly aloof from each other. The Brito-Pictish Church was the older of the two by more than a century, and they did much to evangelize not only the pagan tribes that inhabited the British Isles in early days, but they sent their missionaries to Continental Europe as well. The Gaidheals came upon the scene at a later date, and they did not hesitate to rewrite the history of this century or more of great missionary expansion and, in so doing, to make it appear that it was the Gaidheals, not the missionaries of Northern Pictland, who evangelized Britain and established strong missionary centers on the Continent.

Then came the fabulists of the early Middle Ages. By this time the Italian Mission had become powerful in northern lands. At least one eminent Scottish historian goes so far as to declare repeatedly that fabulists of the Latin Church

deliberately rewrote the history, already garbled by the Gaidheals, and made it appear that Rome had evangelized Northern Europe.¹

A celebrated geographical error is another important reason for the confusion that exists. For many centuries the geography of the famous Ptolemy was accepted by learned men throughout Europe. It cannot be denied that Ptolemy was an authority of major rank, but, due to an error in his calculations, his ancient maps show Scotland (Northern Pictland), *extending at right angles* to the north of England. Thus the true north of Scotland is Ptolemy's "east"; the true west of Scotland is his "north"; the true east of Scotland is his "south." This was accepted by early historians, and thus the missionary labors of the Brito-Picts and the Iro-Picts was misunderstood. Strangely enough, standard reference books today repeat some of these absurd errors.

Many years ago Thomas Maclaughlin, an eminent Scottish historian, published his well-known work.² In it he points out the sharp distinction between the Celtic Church and the Roman Church, proving from ancient records that the Celtic Church antedated the Roman Church in northern lands by several centuries. He quoted ancient sources to prove that the Celtic Church was thoroughly evangelical, that her *muinntirs* were not monasteries by any stretch of the imagination, but powerful missionary training schools, well equipped and efficient, and able to train large numbers of forceful preachers. He quoted ancient authorities, showing that these men preached the simple truths of evangelical Christianity and not a sentence exists to prove that they knew a thing of transubstantiation, adoration of the Virgin Mary, invocation of the saints, etc., etc. Maclaughlin, however, fell into grievous error in attributing most of the evangelization of the northern European countries, British and Continental, to one man: Columba, and to one school: Iona.

Dr. Skene, called "the giant historian," followed with his large work on the *Pictish Chronicle*, reproducing it in colored plates and giving the full Latin text of this ancient document.

¹ Archibald B. Scott. See list of his works at the end of this essay. See also J. H. Burton, *The History of Scotland*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, 1867), Vol. I, p. 41.

² Thos. Maclaughlin, *The Early Scottish Church* (Edinburgh, 1865).

In addition, he published a notable work of three good-sized volumes on the ancient Celtic Church.³ Skene lived in a day when the writings of the fabulists were taken seriously; and thus he cannot be considered a reliable authority.

In 1885 Dr. Alexander MacBain, Headmaster of Raining School, was asked to read a paper before the Gaelic Society of Inverness, of which he was a member. The subject was prosaic enough, for it was a critical discussion of the *Book of Deer*. Toward the end of his paper he read a few sentences that were destined to revise Church history. He declared that St. Columba has been a much-overrated man. Columba "swallowed up into his own fame all the work of his predecessors, companions, and contemporaries, and deprived generations of pioneers and missionaries of their just fame."⁴ This caused other men to conduct research work. Trained historians examined the ancient documents and the biographies of early missionaries to the northern countries. Mr. W. Douglas Simpson, with his extensive knowledge of the Celtic crosses and other ancient monuments that dot the countryside in the countries where the Celts once lived, published several works on the Celtic Church and its origins.⁵ Mr. Archibald B. Scott,⁶ who was well acquainted with the early Celtic tribes, their languages and customs, published several works of great significance. Dr. Alexander R. MacEwen, professor of Church History at the Free Church's New College and divinity hall, Edinburgh, began to publish what promised to be a most important history,⁷ but he died before the second volume was off the press. His admirable history stops short with the Reformation period. He deals fully with the ancient Celtic Church, but he died before the careful research work of his several contemporaries had been completed. Thus it is that he falls into several of the old absurd blunders.

What were these blunders? In some cases they were the

³ W. F. Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots* (Edinburgh, 1867); and *Celtic Scotland*, 3 vols., (Edinburgh, 1876—80).

⁴ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. XI (1885), p. 150.

⁵ See list of Mr. Simpson's books at the end of this essay.

⁶ See list below.

⁷ A. R. MacEwen, *A History of the Church in Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1913—18).

unintentional speculations of men unfamiliar with the old Celtic dialects and the early church customs. Or, where such knowledge existed in part, some of the early historians described conditions in terms with which their readers were familiar. A parallel case might be that of one of our Lutheran professors of today who might write a history of ancient church life for the benefit of the laity. In order to make matters clear, he might describe St. Paul preaching to the communicant members of a certain church, then calling together their church officers for a meeting and telling them of a conference that had just been held in Jerusalem. Thus, by using such words as "communicant members," "church officers," and "conference," he would make matters clearer to the average reader. The historians of the Middle Ages did the same thing. They used terms with which their readers were familiar. Thus it was that the *muinntir* was called a monastery, an *ab* was called a bishop, and other terms were used that did not at all describe accurately the life in Celtic days.

Other historians speculated. Since it was customary for men to go to Rome for their education, we find the astonishing statement that the early Celts were educated in Rome—a place of which they had heard but vaguely and to which a clannish Celt would never think of going. A Celt going to Rome for his education would prove as incongruous as an Irish Catholic seminarian going to Oxford or Cambridge for his post-theological work. Thus if we read in a modern encyclopedia that Ninian or Columba or Maelrubha studied at Rome, we may well look upon this as pure speculation of some Medieval historian. The Celts did not go to Rome, neither did they seek sanction from the Pope when they established a missionary community among the pagans.

St. Patrick has suffered many things at the hands of the fabulists. He was not an Irishman, not a Roman Catholic, and not a bishop, although the garblers of history have made him all of these things. Standard encyclopedias declare that Patrick received his education from St. Martin of Tours, but were one to take the trouble to verify dates, he would find that St. Martin died when St. Patrick was but eleven years of age. Undaunted, the fabulists continue to print the names of

St. Patrick's disciples,⁸ even though some of these alleged disciples were in their graves long before Patrick was born.

Careful historians have known for years that these anachronisms exist, and the task of disentangling the true history of the early Celtic Church from the history of the later Latin Church, to say nothing of speculations and legends, has been a laborious task; but recent careful research by men well acquainted with Gaelic, and with the old Celtic dialects, has made order out of hopeless confusion. Even so eminent a historian as Dr. Johann H. Kurtz allowed himself to fall into ludicrous errors. Kurtz's chapter on the Celtic Church is a tangle of anachronisms and contradictions, including the astounding statement that the Pictish Church quickly lapsed into paganism after St. Ninian's death.⁹ Here Dr. Kurtz is following such unreliable authorities as the Venerable Bede, Adamnan, Ailred, Ussher, Stokes, Reeves, Maclaughlin, and Skene. These noted church historians in turn were followers of the Italian fabulists who tried to make it appear that it was Rome, and not St. Ninian and St. Columba of the rival Celtic Church, that evangelized northern Europe. The Italian fabulists could not deny that the Pictish Church existed, but they made it appear that it was unimportant and of short duration. As a matter of historic record, the Pictish Church flourished for 470 years, which is longer than any other Church, Celtic, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, held sway in the same countries. The Pictish Church was supreme from about 420 A. D. to about 890 A. D. Roman Christianity was introduced into the North by way of Canterbury, in 597 A. D. For two centuries Latin Christianity and Celtic Christianity flourished side by side. A partially Latinized and partially conformed Church existed from 842 to 1107 A. D. The Latin Church became supreme in 1109 A. D., after all others had recognized her jurisdiction, and in the North the Roman Church held sway from 1109 A. D. until 1560 A. D.

New York City (To be concluded)

⁸ One ambitious friend of prelacy states that Patrick brought with him to Ireland "350 holy bishops."

⁹ Joh. H. Kurtz, *Church History*, 3 vols. Robertson Nicoll, Ed. (London and New York, 1889), I, 450—459. Anglican writers likewise follow the Medieval fabulists. This may be due to their eagerness to support their myth of an unbroken apostolic succession. It is to the interest of such theorists to make it appear that Rome was in Britain from earliest times.