

THE INCREDIBLE HISTORY OF GOD'S TRUE CHURCH - (1)

By

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CHAPTER ONE - THE SETTING

"For mountains, bridges, rivers, churches and fair women, Britain is past compare." (Martial).

I have before me a Bible Atlas showing the growth of the early Christian Church to the time of Constantine. In common with other publications of this type, it traces the establishment of the Church in Britain back to about the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, close to the year A.D. 300.

This view is one which is also reflected by many, if not most modern writers of this subject. Statements by earlier writers which suggested a first century, apostolic origin of the church in Britain, have been relegated to the realm of tradition, myth, or plain wishful thinking.

Even the majority of churches at the present time seem to be of this opinion, but this has not always been the case. About three hundred years ago a massive work entitled, "*The Ecclesiastical History of Britain*," by Collier, was produced. The book, published in ten volumes, gave the generally held opinions of leading theologians and churchmen of the time.

On page 27, Vol. 1, Collier makes the point that:

"By what been said already, it is evident Christianity got footing in the apostolic age: but what progress was made upon infidels; in what parts the church was settled, and under whom; what successes or discouragements; what revolutions happened in the ecclesiastical history of this island, from the apostles to King Lucius, is altogether uncertain."

It is not surprising that Collier knew nothing of the period between the apostles and the second century King Lucius. In Britain, as elsewhere, this represented the incredible "Lost Century" of Church history.

For many centuries there existed two separate schools of thought regarding church history in Britain. Many have assumed that prior to the Reformation, the only church in Britain (apart from the Church of God) was the Catholic Church.

There existed, however, until Saxon times, the British or Celtic church, along with the Church of Rome. These two churches often differed in their general approach and also on many doctrinal points. By about the time of King Alfred, however, Catholic influence within England the Celtic church had increased to the point that the British church as a separate body had virtually ceased to exist.

The British Church for many centuries held the view that the apostolic origin of the church in Britain was a point of historical fact - not mere tradition. Early Catholic writers such as Bede, placed the origin of Christianity in Britain in the second century, under King Lucius.

The Catholic position seems to have been based not so much on theology or history as on political considerations. During the "*Holy Roman Empire*" period one of the major foundations of papal authority was the antiquity of the Roman Church.

The first century church at Rome was claimed to have been the "*Mother Church*" or headquarters Church for Europe and the West. Other churches in the West were said to have been established from Rome. The British view, based on the statement by Gildas that Christianity arrived in Britain during the last year of the reign of Tiberius (A.D.36-37), proved an embarrassment to Catholic writers. This date is over twenty years before the arrival of the Apostle Paul in Rome.

One of the major problems relating to the history of the Church of God in Britain during the early centuries is an almost total absence of local written records. Prior to about A.D. 542, one is forced to rely on the testimony of foreign writers regarding Christianity in Britain. In that year, Gildas, often said to have been the first British historian, wrote the amazing statement that

"We certainly know that Christ, the True Sun, afforded His light, the knowledge of His precepts, to our island in the last year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar." (1)

The words "*We certainly know*" is an indication that in the time of Gildas, the date of AD. 36-37 for the establishment of Christianity in Britain was more than just speculation or tradition; it was the commonly accepted view of the time.

Gildas wrote primarily as a historian rather than a theologian. Although a Catholic himself, he seems to have had nothing but contempt for the clergy of his day. He describes them in the following terms:

"Britain has priests, but they are foolish; a multitude of ministers, but they are shameless; clergy, nay, crafty ravishers; shepherds as they are called, but they are wolves, ready to slay souls - teaching the people, but showing them the worst examples, vices and wicked manners."

This writer, although probably not the first British historian was certainly the first that we have any record of to commit his thoughts to paper. He was aware of the British identity, as part of the "*ten lost tribes of Israel*."

Commenting on the Saxon invasions which were in progress at the time he stated that the reason why God allowed such events were:

"to the end that our Lord might in this land try after His accustomed manner these His Israelites, whether they loved Him or not."

Gildas was personally affected by the troubled times in which he lived. It was said that on one occasion he was forced to seek refuge from pirates on an island in the Bristol Channel, near the site of the modern town of Weston-Super-Mare.

It is important to realize that before the time of Gildas the British language (there was no "English" language prior to Saxon times) was primarily a spoken rather than written language.

Jackson, an authority on the subject, mentions that

"It would not occur to anyone to write in British, nor would they know how to do so."

Celtic, Pre-Roman Europe and Britain passed on law, genealogy, story, song and myth in oral but not written form. This does not mean that all first century Britons were uneducated. Oral communication was considered to be superior to the written word. Education was primarily a matter of memorizing a vast accumulation of knowledge.

"They (scholars) are said there to learn by heart a great number of verses; accordingly some remain in the course of training twenty years. Nor do they regard it lawful to commit these to writing."(2)

Some sources state that by the time of graduation students were expected to have committed to memory the staggering total of 20,000 verses. It is probable that such material was arranged in allegorical or poetic form to aid the memory.

The knowledge of church history, in common with knowledge in general, was passed on by word of mouth from teacher to student, father to son. In process of time such information as remained extant took the form of traditions.

There must have been a tendency, human nature being what it is, for each generation to add a little "colour" before passing on the story. Someone once described tradition as the *"accumulated common sense of centuries."*

When the empire-wide persecution of the Christian church under Diocletian reached Britain about A.D. 300, church buildings, Bibles, and other written records were put to the torch. Any records that survived almost certainly perished in the Saxon invasions of the following centuries.

Archeologists have sometimes been puzzled by the scarcity of remains of church buildings from the Roman occupation of Britain. This might seem strange in the light of the comment by Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407) that:

"The British Isles, which are beyond the sea, and which lie in the ocean, have received the power of the Word. Churches are there founded, and altars erected." (3)

The answer to this apparent contradiction lies in the building materials used for church buildings at the time.

The story of Patrick's work in Ireland explains the problem which has sorely puzzled some of our archaeologists, why there are so few remains of churches of the Roman period. St. Martin's, Canterbury, and a few others, none of which are in Wales, contain Roman work, and may have been used for Christian purposes even in the Roman period, by the Roman Christians or the Romanized Britons; but probably the majority of the churches throughout Britain, and almost certainly the majority in Wales, were wooden. Occasionally when wood was scarce, Patrick built a church of earth, as at Foirrgea - he "*made a quadrangular church of earth, because there was no forest near at hand!*" (4) Churches of stone were rare.

Many modern writers have rejected early evidence of a first century church in Britain on the grounds that the Britons living in that age were gentiles.

The Apostles (except for Paul) were commanded to "*go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*". Paul alone, a few tell us, could have visited Britain in his capacity of Apostle to the Gentiles, but surely none of the other Apostles.

In Chapter Two we will examine the question - were the first century Britons really Gentiles, or a part of Israel?

FOOTNOTES -- Chapter 1

- (1) *De Excidio Britannica* page 25.
- (2) *Gallic War* by Caesar.
- (3) *Epist Contra Judaeos*.
- (4) *A History of the Welsh Church*, E.J. Newell.

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