

judge ye, and let it be most truly believed, that it was the gift of God. And this is my confession before I die.”⁵⁸

Columba

The evangelism of Ireland by Patrick and others resulted in one of the most extraordinary missionary accomplishments of the Middle Ages. It was a missionary venture conducted largely by the Celtic church as compared with the Western Roman church. “There was a passion for foreign missions in the impetuous eagerness of the Irish believers,” writes Edman, “a zeal not common in their day. Burning with love for Christ, fearing no peril, shunning no hardship, they went everywhere with the Gospel.”⁵⁹ But though they spread out all over central Europe and as far north as Iceland, it was Britain, the homeland of the first great missionary to Ireland, that became their first “foreign” field. Although the church there would later become part of Roman Catholicism, it would be that land that centuries later would provide the impetus for Protestants in the global evangelism of the nineteenth century.

Celtic missionary monks, according to E. H. Broadbent, conducted “a purer form of missionary work” than that which went out from Rome:

Their method was to visit a country and, where it seemed suitable, fund a missionary village. In the centre they built a simple wooden church, around which were clustered school-rooms and huts for the monks, who were the builders, preachers, and teachers. Outside this circle, as required, dwellings were built for the students and their families, who gradually gathered around them. The whole was enclosed by a wall, but the colony often spread beyond the original enclosure. Groups of twelve monks would go out, each under the leadership of an abbot, to open up fresh fields for the Gospel. Those who remained taught in the school, and, as soon as they had sufficiently learned the language of the people among whom they were, translated and wrote out portions of Scripture, and also hymns, which they taught to their scholars. They were free to marry or to remain single; many remained single so that they might have greater liberty for the work. When some converts were made, the missionaries chose from among them small groups of young men who had ability, trained them specially in some handicraft and in languages, and taught them the Bible and how to explain it to others, so that they might be able to work among their own people. They delayed baptism until those professing faith had received a certain amount of instruction and had given some proof of steadfastness. They avoided attacking the religions of the people, counting it more profitable to preach the truth to them than to expose their errors. They accepted the Holy Scriptures as the source of faith and life and preached justification by faith. They did not take part in politics or appeal to the State for aid. All this work, in its origin and progress, though it had developed some features alien to New Testament teaching and Apostolic example, was independent of Rome and different in important respects from the Roman Catholic system.⁶⁰

One of the most noted of these Celtic abbot-missionaries was Columba, who was born into a noble Irish family in 521 and brought up in the Christian faith. As a young man he entered a monastery, where he was ordained a deacon and later a priest. His evangelistic zeal was evident early in his ministry, and he is credited with establishing many churches and monasteries in Ireland, including those famous ones at Derry, Durrow, and Kells.

Columba's switch from "home" missions to "foreign" missions at the age of forty-two was motivated "for the love of Christ," according to his seventh-century biographer, but there were apparently other factors involved as well. His biographer concedes that he was excommunicated by the synod but claims that it was an unjust action over a trifling matter. However, Will Durant contends that his excommunication and departure for Britain were motivated by more than a trifling matter: "He was a fighter as well as a saint, 'a man of powerful frame and mighty voice;' his hot temper drew him into many quarrels, at last into war with King Diarmuid; a battle was fought in which, we are told, 5,000 men were killed; Columba, though victorious, fled from Ireland (563), resolved to convert as many souls as had fallen in that engagement at Cooldrevna."⁶¹

Whatever Columba's reasons were for embarking on the foreign field, the fact remains that he went, and through his years of service he made a significant impact on Britain. With twelve clerics to serve under him, he established his headquarters just off the coast of Scotland on Iona, a small bleak, barren, foggy island battered year-round by the pounding waves of the sea. Here he established a monastery that fostered the routine monastic life of prayer, fasting, meditation, Bible study, and manual labor; but in addition, and more importantly, it provided training for evangelists who were then sent out to preach the gospel, build churches, and establish more monasteries.

Columba himself was active in missionary work, and from Iona he traveled many times into Scotland proper. He is credited with having evangelized the Picts, who lived in the Scottish highlands. Through his witness, King Brude, who reigned over the northern Picts, was converted. Brude initially refused to allow Columba to enter the gates of his city, but Columba stayed outside and prayed until the king relented. As with Patrick more than a century earlier, Columba faced fierce opposition from the druids; but like his predecessor, he challenged them to match their trickery against the power of God. Columba's theology, according to Latourette, "was as much a religion of miracles as of ethics and even more than of formal creeds."⁶²

As important as Columba's missionary efforts were, many scholars today would disagree with his admiring seventh-century biographer that he and his trainees at Iona were alone responsible for the evangelism of England and Scotland. There were many other missionaries from Ireland and elsewhere doing evangelism in this area who were in no way associated with him. The issue of Columba's importance relates in part to the importance of Roman Catholic missionaries, and many later historians have attempted to give the missionaries commissioned by the pope a greater share of the credit than may have been warranted. There was strong competition between Roman Catholic and Celtic missionaries, the Catholics eventually gaining the upper hand, but the initial work of evangelizing much of Britain and central Europe was accomplished by the energetic and faithful Celtic monks.

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