

IN THE BEGINNING, II: COLUMBA, THE CELTIC CHURCH, AND THE GREAT EASTER DEBATE

by Tom Cox

The Presbyterian church has its primary roots in the Reformation and, particularly, the work of John Calvin and John Knox, but there are other elements to the story, elements that run much further back in time. Christianity first came to Scotland — where Presbyterianism would first flower — early in the fifth century through the work of Ninian. Like all things Celtic in Britain, it was battered by the Saxon invasions that began in 450 and soon went into a century of decline. But the Saxon advances were halted around 500 by Celtic victory in the Battle of Mons Badonicus, thus opening the way for a revival of the Celtic church. At this point Columba came onto the scene. A prince of the O'Donnells of Donegal, Columba had established monasteries in Ireland — at Derry, Durrow, and Kells — in the mid-500s. The work at these monastic centers was crucial, for following the fall of the Roman Empire much knowledge was lost in the chaos of the times; Columba's efforts provided vital islands of serenity where classical knowledge was preserved — a work so important that it has resulted in a recent history entitled *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, a work that overstates the case only slightly.

In 561 Columba gave up the life of teaching and scholarship to take up missionary work in Scotland. He first established a base on the tiny island of Iona, off Scotland's west coast, and with a handful of co-workers gradually evangelized the Celtic population of Scotland's Highlands and northern Lowlands. As in Ireland, he established a number of monastic centers from which to carry on this work. The approach was markedly successful; before Columba's death in 597, northern Scotland was entirely Christian, and Iona had become a special, holy site where for generations after Scottish kings were buried.

Celtic Christianity grew up relatively independent and isolated. As a result, a number of its practices differed from those of the Roman church: it eschewed use of the tonsure (the shaving of the head) to indicate clerical status, followed different baptismal practices, celebrated Easter on a different date than the Roman church, and — most important — vested primary authority with the abbots of the various monasteries, not the Pope (or bishops and archbishops as his representatives). As Augustine of Canterbury and others spread the Roman Church in what would become England, it was only a matter of time before a clash between Celtic Christianity and the practices endorsed by Papal authority would come to a head.

The Venerable Bede, the first great historian of Britain, recounts what followed in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, written in the early eighth century. At first, representatives of Rome simply called upon the Celtic leaders to give up their unorthodox practices and recognize the primacy of Rome — as Archbishop Laurentius put it in 605, “to observe unity of peace, and conformity with the church of Christ. . . .” Celtic leaders demurred, marshaling arguments to show that they had followed their system for 150 years and saw no reason to question the wisdom of their forebears and their most educated leaders in established the practices that they had.

The conflict finally came to a head in 664. Bishop Colman of the Scots and Bishop Agilbert of the West Saxons agreed to submit their differences to the judgment of King Oswy of Northumbria who was acknowledged as the primary king in all Britain. Pushed by his son Alfrid, who was a devote follower of the Roman church, King Oswy agreed to hear the case, and the Synod of Whitby resulted. Bishop Colman did not speak King Oswy's Germanic tongue, so he deferred to Wulfrid, a young priest who shared his views, to make his case. Wulfrid appealed to Celtic tradition, to the wisdom of Columba and other forebears, and to such Biblical authority on the subject as he could muster. Bishop Agilbert spoke for himself — and for Rome. In addition to Biblical arguments of his own, he leaned heavily on the positions taken by various councils of the church and by the Pope. In the end, King Oswy sided with Bishop Agilbert. Since both sides agreed that the keys of the kingdom had been given to Peter, he stated, he would not take a position contrary to that of Peter's successor — the current holder of the keys — and thus endanger his own entry into heaven. Although the Celtic practices did not die out immediately, for all practical purposes the debate was over.

To the modern observer, this controversy hardly seems important — almost as silly as the medieval debates over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. It is hard to imagine how it could stir over a century of conflict, for to us it seems clear that, like Christmas, the celebration of Easter is symbolic and — central though it is to Christianity — we simply do not know the precise dates on which the crucifixion and resurrection took place.

But more was involved than the dating of Easter observances. Lurking just beneath the surface in all this was the larger question of who was in charge of the church. The Celts were, by implication, questioning the primacy of the Pope and the diocesan system through which he ruled; as such they had to be brought to heel. And King Oswy to the contrary notwithstanding, they were only brought into partial and reluctant submission. Scottish church leaders continued to struggle against outside authority, allying themselves time and again over the years with the cause of Scottish independence, and, when the Reformation came, supplying various leaders who worked alongside John Knox in advancing the Reform cause.

It was in subtle recognition of this long-ago resistance to outside authority that the Scottish Presbyterians adopted the Celtic cross, the Cross of Iona, as the symbol of their faith. It is thus in recognition of our debt to them — and to Columba, Bishop Colman, and their other forerunners — that the First Presbyterian Church sports the Celtic cross today not only in a dominant position below the rose window, but also on the ends of each pew. At every service, we sit on pews marked with and view a central cross symbolic of the rugged independence that from the beginning has characterized the Christian church in Scotland and of which John Knox himself was a natural product.

Appropriately, too, the restored abbey on Iona, from whence Columba launched his evangelization efforts, is today an important Christian retreat center that Presbyterians played a prominent role in establishing.