

Was There a British Church Before Augustine Came?

An Examination of the Evidence

ON Friday, the 19th April, George Carey, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, was enthroned in Canterbury Cathedral.

Few who witnessed that ceremony, either as members of the congregation or who formed part of the vast number of viewers throughout the world, can have failed to find their pulses racing a little as the pageantry proceeded. Nor would there be many who did not respond to the inspiring and exciting words of the Archbishop in his address.

George Carey was recognised as a man of vigour and conviction; a strong man, a friendly man who would spend little time "sitting on the fence." Yet a tiny feeling of apprehension continues to disturb one. When a man is not "sitting on the fence," should we not ask on which side of the fence does he stand?

In the course of his address, the one hundred and third Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of All England, spiritual head of the Church of England (the Queen is its Supreme Governor) and leader of the Anglican Communion throughout the world, made reference to Pope Gregory's emissary to these islands, a monk named Augustine; who, in the year A.D. 597, and who, to quote the Archbishop, "nearly fourteen hundred years ago, landed on a wild Kentish shore. He came with a desire to make Christ known as the Light of the World."

We cannot doubt that Augustine was so imbued; nor can we doubt

that the Archbishop was well aware that the Christian Church was already established here in Britain long before Augustine's arrival. It was, however, somewhat unfortunate that the words of the Archbishop may have been understood by some to mean that the birth of Christianity in these islands occurred when Augustine arrived on the coast of Kent, but not before.

To interpret the words in this way is not merely fanciful but very probable, because it is contended by a number of historians that there has been a conspiracy to disparage, if not to deny, the existence of the early church in Britain. All too few Britons today, will have been able to avoid this and other false teaching prosecuted by the Roman Church throughout the centuries. Are we to see the consummation of that teaching in the next decade?

It is held by others - it has to be admitted that they are the majority - that there is no hard evidence of a Christian Church of any significance prior to the year 314. However, the *Nomina Episcoporum* of the Council of Arles in that year provides the names of three British bishops: Eborius of York, Restitutus of London and Adelphius, whose see may have been Lincoln, Colchester or Caerleon.

Arles is conclusive that there was an organised Christian Church in Britain prior to Augustine's arrival. De facto, the existence of bishops implies the existence of subordinate clergy and the congregations to which they ministered.

It is argued that because there is no record of British delegates attending the Council of Nicaea in 325 or of the Council of Sardica in 343, the church must have been in serious decline. This suggestion can be repudiated by reason of the recorded payment of travelling expenses to British delegates at the Council of Ariminum in 359. In any case, it is not reasonable to assume that members of Christian bodies do not exist simply because they do not attend conferences. In our movement today we are only too aware of this fact.

Much contempt is poured upon the belief that St. Paul visited these islands and that Joseph of Arimathea established on the Isle of Avalon perhaps the first Christian Church in Britain. The sheer weight of opinion is intimidating, until it is realised that opinion unsupported by evidence is of little value.

The legends and traditions which give rise to belief in a vigorous pre-Augustine Christian Church are themselves circumstantial evidence deserving serious consideration. It is not "wishful thinking", nor of modern invention that the good folk of Priddy in the Mendips, in order to emphasise a point, will say, "as sure as the Lord was in Priddy."

It is well said that the onus of proof rest with he who makes the proposition. But in the absence of authenticated records there are reasonable suppositions and assumptions which must stand until positively disproved. Mere disapproval is not disproof.

The recognition of the early Church in these islands during the first three centuries A.D. does suffer from a paucity of first-hand witnesses, but there are reputable commentators. We can be grateful to the late Rev G. H. Nicholson for assembling, in very convenient form, many statements by early church historians showing (quoting from the title page of his valuable booklet) "...that the Church of England can claim Apostolic foundation, unbroken continuity and scriptural authority as the sole basis of its rule of faith and its form of government." We do well to look askance at the scholars who disregard the statements made, roughly four hundred years before Augustine, by men of the intellectual stature of Tertullian and Eusebius.

Tertullian, who died in A.D. 222, wrote, "The extremities of Spain, the various parts of Gaul, the regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by Roman arms

have received the religion of Christ." (*Def, Fidei*, p.179).

Eusebius wrote at the time of the Council of Arles (314 A.D.), "The Apostles passed beyond the ocean to the isles called the Britannic Isles." (*De Demonstratione Evangelii*, Lib. 111).

To suggest, that the Roman Church has falsified British history to its advantage, is met with some astonishment and no little resentment on the part of church people who could call themselves orthodox. It was not always so. In the last century, many erudite men of the Church defended the veracity of the Arimathea mission: that Joseph of Arimathea did, indeed, come to the Isle of Avalon and there founded a church in Glastonbury. A powerful supporter of this belief was Archbishop Usher.

A century and more ago, it would have occasioned no surprise to have expressed the opinion that St. Paul visited these islands, that he

preached here, and was the friend of a royal house of Britain.

From his own hand we have reference to that close association in his Second Epistle to Timothy. They and he shared the same fate of martyrdom.

In the compass of a short article only the most fleeting mention can be made of these tremendous events, but discerning Christians will understand that satan's intention is the subversion of our spiritual heritage as a precursor to the frustrating of God's purposes by means of His people, the true Israel. Our task and privilege is to learn, disseminate and rejoice in the truth of God's Holy Word. This brings enlightenment and salvation to all who honour Him, ensuring the renewal and revival of His people through Christ our Lord, who undoubtedly walked these lands in ancient days.

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