

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS OF BRITAIN.

NOT a few writers have contended that Christianity was introduced to Britain by one of Christ's earliest ministers. Some, on a show of mere monkish testimony, so poor that even Baronius, the Roman Catholic annalist, condemns it, claim Peter as the father of the British churches. Others, on evidence quite as slender, lay claim to Aristobulus, whom Paul mentions in his epistle to the Romans. A third party—favoured by the positive testimony of the early monkish historian, William of Malmsbury, and overlooking a crowd of monstrous legends with which his tale is surrounded—lay claim to Joseph of Arimathea. But the boldest, as well as the least visionary, and at the same time the most numerous,

are a class who clamour for the apostle Paul. If any at all of the first ministers of Christ introduced the gospel to our country, Paul certainly appears to have been the man. Theodoret, who wrote about the year 440, says, "Our fishermen, publicans, and *tentmakers*, persuaded not only the Romans and their subjects, but also the Scythians, Indians, Persians, Hyrcanians, *Britons*, Cimmerians, and Germans to embrace the religion of the crucified Saviour;" and he is supposed to indicate Paul by the word "*tentmakers*," and to connect it particularly with the nations of the west,—especially as he speaks directly of Paul in some kindred passages, and seems there to insinuate that he preached in Spain and in Britain. Clement of Rome, Eusebius, and Jerome write to the same purpose; though with equal confusedness and indecision. What they say would be perfectly conclusive, if it were clear, distinct, unhesitating, and free from ambiguity; but it is so general, so misty, so like the utterance of a faltering witness, as to seem rather the offspring of idle conjecture or credulous hearsay—faults remarkably prominent in the early historians—than the easy statement of authenticated facts. Paul, for all we know, may, or he may not, have preached the gospel in Britain. Just enough of evidence exists on the subject to deter a candid man from arriving at any firm opinion on the one side of it or on the other, and to fix the attention of all wise inquirers, not on the instrument by whom the churches of this country were founded, but on the exalted principles which gave them existence.

Doubt as to who was the first Christian minister in Britain, gives rise to doubt as to when Christianity was introduced. The precise date is uncertain; yet, by a strong concurrence of probable evidence—including such as is perfectly conflicting on the other point—it seems to be lodged somewhere before the commencement of the second century. Gildas, the most ancient British historian, who wrote about

the year 560, was of course too late to speak on the authority of even a tolerable tradition; but he had access to whatever opinions were afloat in his day, and, as if stating what none of his contemporaries called in question, he says, "Christ afforded the knowledge of his precepts to this island, as we know, about the end of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, at which time his religion was propagated (in the Roman empire) without any hinderance." The south-east parts of Britain were formed into a Roman province in the year 43; the west-riding of Yorkshire soon after became the seat of a Roman colony; and London and St. Albans had for years before been large free cities, crowded with Roman citizens. A constant intercourse with the capital, and with all the most stirring scenes of the empire, was the result,—many Romans travelling into Britain to occupy civil and military posts, and not a few of our countrymen passing into Italy or the east to transact secular affairs. In such a state of things—especially as Christianity had made so great progress at the seat of government as to draw the particular notice of the state—there existed as much both of facility and attraction to bring the Gospel to Britain, as had already proved effectual to introduce it to several remote countries of the east. The wife of Plautius, the first governor of the British Roman province, appears to have been a Christian, tried, steadfast, and persevering; and if she held much influence in her husband's court, she may have been instrumental, between the years 43 and 47, of diffusing around her some knowledge of Christianity. From that time till a considerable period onward, Britain enjoyed great tranquillity, and, being favoured with a succession of mild and tolerant governors, offered an inviting shelter to the victims of persecution on the continent. During the days of Nero, in particular, when vast multitudes of Christians in Italy fled from the tremendous proscriptions which were mowing down their brethren by thousands, Britain could hardly fail to be regarded by some

of the persecuted preachers of the cross, as both a providential asylum, and a delightfully opportune sphere of labour.

Other circumstances, independent of those glanced at, render it highly probable that this country enjoyed very early the light of the gospel. Evidence of a positive nature, however, or such as does not more or less admit of objection, cannot be made to bear upon any period within so wide a range as even to the close of the second century. Perhaps the most unexceptionable testimony is the celebrated one of Tertullian, written A. D. 209, which has been construed to refer to both Scotland and Wales, if not even to Ireland:—“Those parts of Britain into which the Roman arms never penetrated have yielded subjection to Christ.” But even this—especially when viewed in connexion with the drift of the passage in which it occurs—might have been intended rather to describe the diffusiveness of Christianity, that property of it which, whether its disciples be few or many, disperses them far and near, than to assert the public introduction or the general profession of it among the British people. That there were some Christians in this country at the commencement of the third century, is certain; but that, at any period previous to that epoch, they were numerous or constituted a considerable portion of the population, is at best only very probable. A story, which has been repeated by most of our historians, and which ascribes the origin of British churches to royal favour, and fixes the date of it about the year 164, is unworthy of credit. According to this story, Lucius a king of Britain, and the general body of his subjects, were converted to Christianity by missionaries deputed from the emperor and bishop of Rome. Three conflicting opinions, however, are maintained by different writers, as to the territory over which the supposed Lucius reigned, and upwards of a score of conflicting opinions as to the date of his and his subjects’ alleged conversion. The story is manifestly a monkish legend. At whatever period the gospel was introduced to this

island, it appears, from all the credible evidence which can be collected, to have kindled with neither the rapid but genial light of an apostle's ministry, nor with the scorching unnatural blaze of magisterial propagation, but with the gradual dawning of its own sweet, soft, ordinary influence, emitting at first but a few far-refracted rays, and continuing, thenceforth, to "shine more and more unto the perfect day." "The kingdom of God" in Britain, though surely and comparatively soon established, "came not with observation."

Nothing beyond a few general facts is known respecting the internal condition of the British churches for a considerable period after they became numerous. They were free from doctrinal error, and enjoyed uninterrupted tranquillity. Their own peaceable behaviour, the mild character of their civil governors, the remote situation of their country, and the dissimilarity of its heathen superstitions to those of Rome, as well as the want of power on the part of its heathen priests, tended either to protect them from the persecutions, or to keep them unacquainted with the controversies, which afflicted other sections of the Christian community. They seem also to have withstood much better and greatly longer than the Italian or eastern churches, the inroads of corruption upon primitive purity and simplicity. Jerome and Chrysostom make frequent mention, even at the late and exceedingly corrupt period when these authors wrote, of the orthodoxy, the learning, the good order, and—what particularly deserves notice—the *indigence* of the British churches. The early Christians of our land had, of course, no ecclesiastical connection with the state, and differed nothing as to manners and discipline, from the eastern Christians of the first and second centuries; and even after they beheld their brethren throughout other parts of the empire aggrandized by state bounty, and allured or driven within the magic ring of Arian or carnalizing errors, they continued, for no inconsiderable

season, to follow at once the worldly poverty and the evangelical doctrines of the primitive times.

The first irruption upon the public peace of the British churches was made by the Dioclesian persecution; and even this was gentle and of short continuance, compared to its ravages in other countries. The Dioclesian persecution—the most hostile, the most relentless, the most general, and the bloodiest which imperial Rome ever inflicted—broke out at the commencement of the fourth century, and visited every province subject to the Cæsars; but though it raged in most other places during the long period of ten years, and worked incredible havoc, it lasted in Britain during only two years, and was here comparatively mild. At its commencement, indeed, it assailed our fathers, as it did the Christians throughout the empire, with deadly cruelty. Alban, a native of the city of St. Albans, which now bears his name, and probably either a minister or a man otherwise eminent, was its earliest victim, surrendering his life rather than renounce or disgrace his faith, and reaping the honour of being the proto-martyr of England. Aaron and Julius, inhabitants of Caerleon in Monmouthshire, together with many Christians, both men and women, in other parts of the country, suffered death under the same visitation. The general body, however, of the ministers and eminent members of the British churches, sought shelter from the first burst of the storm in concealment, and soon were enabled to walk abroad in safety. Constantius Chlorus, the father of Constantine the Great, and a sharer in the imperial purple, was, at that time, governor of Britain; and though not an avowed disciple of Christianity, is supposed by some to have been secretly attached to it, and, at all events, showed a kind and partial feeling to its followers. He could not prevent the decree of persecution from taking effect in part; but, so far as comported with his official safety against the rage of the senior emperors, he appears to have counterworked it, allowing it to expend its

commencing fury as much as possible upon the mere buildings of the Christians, and diverting it, as far as he could, from their persons and their writings. Emboldened by his mildness, they soon withdrew from their concealment, openly rebuilt their places of worship, and resumed, with joyful hearts, the observance of public ordinances.

One of the earliest important acts of Constantine the Great, after he had openly befriended the Christian cause, or rather had assumed to interfere in its ecclesiastical affairs, was to summon a council of pastors or bishops for settlement of the celebrated dispute in Africa which terminated in the Donatist schism. Three of the bishops who sat in that council—and the entire number was only thirty-three—were from Britain, Eborus of York, Adelfius of Lincoln, and Restitus of London. These men bore a large proportion to the entire body,—three compared to thirty-three, being much greater bulk than Britain, and especially England, possesses, compared to the vast territory which was then enlightened by Christianity, and subject to the Roman sway. If they represented, as possibly they did, the numerical proportion which the churches of their country bore to those of other lands, the gospel must, at the period when they lived, have risen to paramount influence among their countrymen, and must have had, in this island, a larger number of disciples than is usually supposed. Either the three bishops, and the body whom they represented, did not understand the drift of Constantine's policy, and afterwards regarded it with coolness and disapprobation, or, for some reason which one cannot easily conjecture, they were treated, in the convoking of the council of Arles, with a degree of consideration which was utterly lost sight of in the subsequent proceedings of both Constantine and his immediate successors. Never again, while the western empire lasted, do we find bishops or ministers of Britain, occupying such a place as those of Lincoln, York, and London did in the council of Arles; for, when future councils,

general, western, or partial, councils consisting repeatedly of more than three hundred bishops, and sometimes succeeding one another at the distance of only a few months, were convoked—no matter in how great an emergency, no matter how professedly catholic in design, no matter how deeply affecting, in the questions to be debated by them, the whole Christian world—either the ministers and churches of Britain were entirely left out of the account, or they made so poor a figure as amounted to but a trifling fraction. If their unswerving orthodoxy be considered—that orthodoxy which continued to earn them eulogies even in the days of Jerome and Chrysostom,—they may well be conceived to have been no fit parties for a place in any of the numerous councils during the reign of the Arian emperor, Constantius. But what shall be said of their relation to the council of Nice,—a council held only eleven years after that of Arles, convoked, like the latter, by Constantine the Great, professing to be strictly “œcumenical,” or universal, and consisting of more than three hundred bishops, besides a vast but unknown number of other members? Surely if Britain sent three representatives to the council of Arles, she ought, according to the common rules of arithmetic, to have sent at least thirty to the council of Nice; and yet, in the latter great council, she was utterly unrepresented! What may we infer from this fact? Many things, no doubt,—any of which, by a greater or less stretch of probability, *may* be true; but the most likely of them all, considering the *indigence* and the *orthodoxy* by which the British churches continued, for more than a century after, to be recognised—an indigence and an orthodoxy which distinguished them in the face of the corrupting opulence and the abounding errors which imperial patronage heaped on the churches of the continent—is that, after the celebration of the council of Arles, or during the proscriptions which soon followed against all the minor or dissenting sections of the orthodox Christians, they discovered the tendency of Con-

stantine's policy, and resolved to stand aloof from his ecclesiastical proceedings. Even, however, if the British churches did act so discerning and so noble a part, they eventually ceased to maintain it; and—though at a distance of more than a century after the churches of Italy and the east—they became bitten with the mania for worldly respectability, and, as almost a necessary consequence, degenerated into a formal, time serving, superstitious, and monkish spirit.
