

LESSONS FROM COLUMBA

Reflections on the Life and Ministry of Saint Columba

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INTRODUCTION

This decade has seen a renaissance of Celtic culture. Celtic art appears on jewelry; Celtic melodies weave through the music of Enya and Clannad; Celtic dance captivates audiences in productions of *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*. We even see Celtic civilization celebrated in books like *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. With such an emphasis on all things Celtic, we as Christians may benefit from remembering our own Celtic heritage. When we look back to the Irish church, we find stories that inspire, entertain, and challenge us. The saints of the Irish church lived passionate and holy lives that sparkled with wit and song, courage and cleverness, passion and pain and joy.

Among the saints of the early Irish church, Saint Columba stands out as a model for our era. Columba, a man of many gifts, was a talented organizer, administrator, and motivator. The tiny monastery that he built on the barren island of Iona would go on to spread Christianity to the continent. In this paper, we will examine Columba's life and work, paying particular attention to his Iona mission and his motivation for starting it. We will also see how Columba looked beyond Iona to a larger mission among the British Isles. After this examination, we will reflect on Columba's story, considering what lessons we might learn for today's church. In approaching such a subject, we must begin with a look at Columba, the man.

COLUMBA, THE MYTH OR THE MAN?

The Celtic love of story and penchant for the fantastic make it difficult to reconstruct a reliable life of Columba. Adamann, writing in the late 7th century, mixes history and hagiography to produce an outlandish tale, elevating Columba to near-divine status. Such extravagance should not surprise us, however, for as Lehane points out, the Irish had a strong sense of superiority, as though they were the chosen people.¹ Irish monks grafted their sense of superiority onto their favorites. Columba was no exception; Schaff tells us: "Adaman ascribes to him an angelic countenance, a prophetic fore-knowledge and miracles as great as those performed by Christ, such as changing water into wine for the celebration

¹ Brendan Lehane. *The Quest of Three Abbots*. New York, Lindisfarne, 1968, 103-4.

of the Eucharist, when no wine could be obtained, changing bitter fruit into sweet, drawing water from a rock, calming the storm at sea, and curing many diseases.”² Columba reputedly even wrangled with Scotland’s most famous sea monster.³ Given the mythos that has arisen around Columba, some find it as easy to dismiss his story as we dismiss King Arthur and Robin Hood. But behind the legends, we find a real man who lived and breathed.

We know that Columba was born in 521 in Ireland. He was named Colm, meaning “dove,” and as he grew and spent more time in church, the suffix “cille” was added, meaning “of the church.” He was of royal lineage, a descendant of the legendary Neill of the Nine Hostages; as such he could have aspired to the throne of Ireland, but instead he chose to serve God as a monk. As a student under Finian at Clonard, he associated with the great apostles of Ireland, including Brendan the Voyager and St. Comgall.⁴ From there he went to study with the other Finian at Moville who treated him favorably (perhaps because of his royal heritage) and impressed upon him his vision for evangelizing Scotland.⁵ Although hundreds of churches in Ireland claim him as their founder, we can only confirm that he planted a church in Derry and a monastery in Darrow before embarking for his Iona mission. Schaff gives us a rousing physical description: “He was manly, tall and handsome, incessantly active, and had a sonorous and far-reaching voice, rolling forth the Psalms of David, every syllable distinctly uttered.” The picture that emerges is of a gifted man who received the benefits of a stellar education and who had an ability for organization. Such a man would have had any number of opportunities before him; why would he have voluntarily exiled himself to a cold and barren island off the northern Scottish coast?

WHY IONA?

The events leading to the founding of the Iona mission give us terrific insight into Columba’s character and the breadth of his influence. In 560,

² Philip Schaff. *History of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans. CD ROM Version. Record 9,799.

³ Westwood tells us that Columba and his companions passed by Loch Ness where they discovered villagers pulling a mangled corpse from the Loch. Columba sent one of his men to swim across the Loch to retrieve a boat that had drifted. Shortly after the man got in the water, the monster appeared and threatened the whole party. Columba, keeping his wits about him, held the creature off with the sign of the cross. “At his command it fled and was never seen again. Well, hardly ever.” Jennifer Westwood. *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*. London, Paladin Books, 1985, 507-8.

⁴ John T. McNeill. *The Celtic Churches: A History AD 200 to 1200*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1974, 88.

⁵ Lehane, 114.

Columba and the house of O'Neill engaged the Irish King Diormid in the battle of Culdreihmne. Columba won the battle, leaving over 3,000 of the enemy dead on the field. Columba's motivation for instigating this battle is a matter of debate. Lehane sketches out the three main theories for us.⁶

The first theory posits that the battle was over a book. While studying with Finian at Moville, Columba secretly worked late at night, copying Jerome's Vulgate by hand. He was making this copy for his own personal use. Late one night, Finian discovered him making the unauthorized copy and claimed the book as the property of the monastery. Since books were quite rare, the issue of ownership of this manuscript was significant. Finian brought the dispute before King Diormid who decided that the book belonged to the monastery. The enraged Columba responded by rallying his kinsmen and attacking Diormid. This theory, while supported by tradition, seems to stretch the bounds of believability.

The second theory gives Columba a bit more noble motive. In this version Columba had given sanctuary to a fugitive from the king. Despite Columba's sanctuary, Diormid seized this man and imprisoned him. Responding to this outrage, Columba took up arms and engaged in battle. In contrast, the final theory supposes that Culdreihmne was actually the last great battle between the old paganism (held by Diormid) and the new Christianity (held by Columba). This notion is weak because of historic support for Diormid's Christian endeavors⁷. In the final analysis, we find that neither of the last two theories are well attested in the literature, while the first theory is favored by tradition. Additionally, this first theory fits well with what we know about Columba's propensity to extreme emotion – especially rage.⁸ Whatever theory we accept, we must realize that each story draws a picture of a courageous man filled with passion and gifted with the ability to lead a large body of men.

The fallout from this battle was exile from Ireland. There is a lack of agreement on whether Columba was forced to leave or whether he left under his own volition. Moorman believes that Columba was exiled by the church as a result of the excessive slaughter at the battle of Culdreihmne.⁹ Lehane adds a bit of color to the story by telling us that Columba vowed never to return to Ireland again.¹⁰ This suggestion, while romantic, does not hold up when we consider that Columba returned to Ireland in 575 for a political council. More believable is

⁶ Lehane, 118-9

⁷ Lehane 119.

⁸ Columba's rages were so legendary that they became incorporated into part of the mythology around this saint. For some examples, see Lehane 117. Also McNeill, 94 and Durant, 532.

⁹ JRH Moorman. *A History of the Church in England*. 3rd edition. Harrisburg, PA. Moorhouse Publishing, 1994, 10.

¹⁰ Lehane, 124.

Schaff's suggestion that Columba left Ireland of his own choosing. Most interesting is McNeill's socio-political view in which he intimates that Columba was invited to Scotland for political reasons.¹¹ To understand his view, we need to take a closer look at the political situation in Scotland at the time of Columba's mission.

Far from being an isolated band of tribes, Scotland was actually a broad cultural *mélange* of peoples, centered around three main groups.¹² The Picts held much of the northland, ruled by Brude mac Maelchon from his capital at Inverness. Meanwhile, the Angles held on to a good part of the southland. Finally there was the kingdom of Dalriada, a fiefdom set up by the Irish Lords of Ulster who had invaded the coastlands of Scotland several generations before. This smaller kingdom was ruled by Conall, a distant kinsman of Columba. The powerful Pict kingdom was nipping at the borders of Dalriada. Needless to say, tensions were high, causing King Conall concern for his continued security. Into this mix comes Columba, recently departed from Ireland. When he sailed from Ireland with his twelve disciples, he went straight to Dalraida¹³ where he met with Conall, his kinsman, and received permission to build his monastery on Iona. Although McNeill does not say it outright, he seems to suggest that this meeting was more than co-incidence. Given Conall's tense situation, it seems quite likely that upon hearing of Columba's difficulties he might have invited Columba to build his monastery as a mission of peace in the region. Such a mission might help calm the warring tendencies of the Pict tribes over the border. The situation would certainly be a win-win, for Conall would benefit from increased peace in the land while Columba would have access to a mission field ripe for the picking. While we cannot be sure how much politicking went on behind the scenes, it does seem reasonable for us to assume that the choice of Iona was no accident.

MONASTIC LIFE AT IONA

Even though Iona seemed to have been deliberately chosen, it was not a very hospitable environment. The small island off the coast of Scotland measured three miles by one mile. The northern climate produced harsh winters and the remote location restricted travel. Perhaps Iona was not the best location for missionary activity, but it was a wonderful location for monastic activity. Deansly tells us that Irish monasticism was influenced by such ascetics as Martin of Tours and the Egyptian desert monks,¹⁴ and O'Faiach claims that "the primary motive [for the monastic movement] was ascetical rather than

¹¹ McNeill, 90-91.

¹² Lehane, 122-3.

¹³ McNeill, 90.

¹⁴ Deanesly, Margaret. *The Pre-Conquest Church in England. An Ecclesiastical History of England*, V1. London, Adam & Charles Black, 1961, 38.

evangelical.”¹⁵ Hughes gives us a very clear picture of Columba’s monastic motives when she writes:

“The development of monasticism in Ireland undoubtedly owed much of its impetus to the ascetic spirit which may have been present from the beginning, but which was certainly powerful in the second half of the sixth century... Columba preached asceticism with passionate sincerity as a life higher, more noble, more rewarding. The ascetic life was arduous, but the Christian was sustained by his love of God; and, as everyone knows, love, even while it is all the trouble in the world, is yet no trouble. Great monastic founders called men, with burning eloquence, to learn the hidden mysteries of God.”¹⁶

We see that Columba sought to live a humble and hard life; Iona seemed the perfect place to achieve this.

The monastery itself was humble: “the usual Celtic pattern – a church and refectory of wood, a group of bee-hive huts, and an encircling wall protecting the whole enclosure.”¹⁷ They built a chapel, a guesthouse, a great house, and a number of necessary farm buildings. In this simple setting, these monks attended to the basic duties of farming, fishing, and copying manuscripts. McNeill tells us how Columba divided the monks into three groups.¹⁸ First there were the Seniors who performed copying of manuscripts and led the community worship services. Then there were the Workers who did the physical labor and taught the third group, the Juniors. These Juniors had not yet taken vows and spent most of their time in study and minor duties. Columba was absolute master over the house, administering ecclesiastical punishment and even getting involved in the affairs of the nearby laity.¹⁹ By all accounts, the monks at Iona sought to live a simple, humble life.

¹⁵ Tomas O’Fiaich. “Irish Monks on the Continent.” *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* Ed by James Mackey. Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1989, 103.

¹⁶ Kathleen Hughes. *The Church in Early Irish Society*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press, 1966, 74

¹⁷ Moorman, 10.

¹⁸ McNeill, 92-3.

¹⁹ For examples of how Columba exerted his authority over his monks, see McNeill, 93. McNeill does tell us, however that “insubordination was not a problem, since obedience was seasoned by affection.” Hughes presents an interesting comparison of the rules of Columba and Columbanus. She paints Columba’s rule as more moderate than the strictness of Columbanus. She also draws out Columba’s involvement in the life of the laity living on Iona. See especially 60-62.

MISSION TO THE PICTS AND BEYOND

Iona's humble appearance and order did not prevent Columba from exerting influence elsewhere. This tiny island became a mission-sending station for all of Northern Scotland. As soon as Columba had established himself on Iona, he began to set his sights upon the Picts. In 564, Columba traveled to Inverness to meet with King Brude of the Picts.²⁰ A number of legends have grown up about Columba's conflict with Brude's advisor, the Druid Broichan.²¹ Although we cannot say how many of the legends are true, it is reasonable for us to assume that Columba and Broichan engaged in a battle of wits and wills, and that the prize of this battle was Brude's confidence. Columba emerged the victor, earning Brude's respect and eventually his conversion. By winning Brude to his side, Columba earned the right to send missionaries all over northern Scotland.

We are hard pressed to pinpoint the scope of Columba's missions activity from this point. There are hundreds of churches that bear Columba's name all across the British Isles: in Scotland, Cornwall, Wales, and even in the Heart of England. Though Iona may have established many of these (particularly the Welsh monastery of Lindisfarne), most of them were created after Columba's time. Romantics like to think that Columba himself planted hundreds of churches, but McNeill brings us back down to earth when he tells us that Columba probably only planted 30 or so churches in the Scottish Isles and on the Northwest coastline:

“We must rest content without exact knowledge of the geography of Columba's mission area and foundations, and recognize that he was less of a pioneer in the absolute sense than has been popularly believed. Nevertheless he must still be esteemed a great and powerful Christian leader who made an immeasurable impact on western Scotland and ultimately on the whole Celtic Christian world.”²²

No matter what the level of Columba's involvement, it is clear that over the years Iona became the center of a missions operation that sent monks everywhere.

Iona kept a controlling relationship with the daughter churches that it spawned. The abbot of Iona maintained spiritual authority over all the daughter

²⁰ Recall that this is the same king Brude who caused Conall of Dalraida so many problems. This early visit of Columba's lends credence to the idea that Conall had encouraged Columba to the region.

²¹ For more details concerning this visit to Brude and the miracle stories surrounding it, see Lehane, 128-131.

²² McNeill, 95.

houses. Hughes describes this as a trend in Irish Christianity: the bishops lost their power and the abbots gained it.²³ This meant that Iona's influence was not geographically bound, but could expand to the limits of human travel. Columba could stretch his spiritual influence far and wide.

Columba also maintained his political influence, particularly in relation to the kings of Dalraida. After King Conall's death in 574, Columba consecrated Adian as king of Dalraida,²⁴ and the following year, Columba accompanied Adian back to Ireland for the Convention of Drumceat. At this conference, Columba would plead for the independence of Dalraida from Ulster and for the maintenance of the bard as a legitimate class. In both cases, Columba exerted enough influence to get his way.²⁵ We can see that Columba's influence extended beyond the spiritual into the political. From all this information, a picture emerges of a devout man towering above Iona with one foot in Ireland and the other Scotland.

LESSONS FROM COLUMBA

Beyond the excitement of reading great stories, we study history in order to be inspired, to learn from example, and to profit from the mistakes of the past. Therefore, the question must naturally arise "What can we learn from Columba's life and ministry?" In this reflection, we will attempt to draw a few lessons for today.

Great Mistakes May Become Great Opportunities

No matter how we look at it, Columba's instigation of the Battle of Culdreihmne was an excess that resulted in the loss of thousands of lives. In letting his passions carry him away, Columba committed a grave error. However, that error directly led to Columba's establishment of the Iona monastery. Had he kept his cool, Columba may have stayed in Ireland and accomplished great things there, but he may not have had the profound impact that he had through Iona. Clearly what we see here is a case of God's providence turning ill events to the good. Much like Joseph's sale into slavery or Jacob's trickery, Columba's hot-headedness was used by God to accomplish a greater good. This is not to say that we have license to act wrongly, but rather to say that our past misdeeds

²³ Hughes, 62-62.

²⁴ This is the Aidan who would ultimately liberate Dalraida from the Picts and would extend his kingdom over Northern Scotland. Columba crowned the dynasty that would rule Scotland for the next five hundred years. See McNeill, 95-6 and Lehane, 151.

²⁵ Lehane, 131; McNeill, 97.

may in fact be God's instrument for a greater good. Therefore, we learn from Columba's mistake that we should be sensitive to how God will use our mistakes (both individual and corporate) in the future.

Self-Sacrifice Lends Authority

Though it cannot be proven, it seems that Columba's austerity and humble living lent him and his followers authority in the eyes of the world. This seems clearly to have been the case in Adamann's biography which celebrates Columba's humility (down to the stone he used as a pillow). By separating themselves from the world and becoming intentionally different, Columba and his followers gained an authority that others did not have. We see this pattern lived out repeatedly: consider the examples of St. Francis and Mother Teresa. Both of them, like Columba, forsook the riches of this world for the joys of Christian service. We even see this pattern in non-Christian leaders like Mohandis Ghandi. Clearly there is something deep in the human psyche that recognizes that too great an attachment to this world is a bad thing. This deep truth in our minds causes us to look upon those who have renounced the things of this world and marvel. We are instinctively drawn to these people, wondering what their secret is.

This lesson seems to be a powerful one for the contemporary church in America. It seems that contemporary evangelicalism has accommodated so much to our affluent culture that there is no distinguishing us from everyone else. Since we are indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, we have lost our moral authority and ability to speak prophetically to the culture. We learn from Columba that self-sacrifice can restore that voice to us.

Influence Can Be Used Legitimately

This lesson serves to qualify the previous lesson. Those American Christians who have engaged in sacrificial living tend to disdain all connections to the culture. This disdain often extends to any kind of influence in political and economic spheres. For them, "authentic Christianity" is purely a one-on-one experience. Columba's continued political influence teaches us that Christians *can* wield institutional leadership in a godly way. We see that Columba maintained great involvement with the kingdom of Dalraida. However, he used this involvement to further the gospel – stabilizing the political climate in Scotland made evangelism all the easier. We learn that as Christians we can use our influence in the culture at large in a godly way, as long as we are guided by wisdom do not misuse that influence.

What About Centralized Leadership?

Church governance is a hot issue in this case. Columba's authoritarian control over Iona and her daughter houses clearly violates the scriptural pattern of church governance. And yet his leadership was effective. What are we to make of this? Are we to adopt his style, throwing Scripture to the wind? Certainly not. We may be able to excuse Columba, noting that the culture and time period in which he operated did not really allow for anything but authoritarian control. However, we cannot affirm Columba's leadership style. Such a style lends itself far too easily to excesses. While Columba was a man of sterling character, lesser men would easily abuse their power (perhaps we see such abuse in certain television preachers today). On this point, we must part company with Columba.

No Program Lasts Forever

By the end of the 9th century, Iona was a deserted ruin. Vikings had repeatedly raided and burned the monastery, and the monks finally retreated back to the relative safety of Ireland. Even though Iona was a powerful and effective ministry, it fell due to totally unforeseen circumstances. This is a very important lesson for us to learn in ministry. In one hundred years, Campus Crusade, Ligionier, and Reformed Theological Seminary may all be forgotten from the memory of evangelical Christendom. The lesson here is not to safeguard against future disaster (though that is a good idea). Rather, the lesson is that no matter how much we protect our institutions, they may not survive into the future. Our focus then should be on the present. We should focus upon ministering now. This is not to say that we should not plan or think about the future of our ministries; rather, we are not to *obsess* about the future of our ministries. It is quite helpful to remember that Columba planted, Iona watered, but God caused the growth of the church in Scotland. Institutions fade away, but God is eternal.

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