

7-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, G. (1999). The Ancient Celtic Way of Being and Doing Church for the Post-Modern West. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 10(2), 3-28. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol10/iss2/2>

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The Ancient Celtic Way of Being and Doing Church for the Post-Modern West

George Hunter III

In the late fourth century (or early fifth century) A.D., a boy named Patrick was being raised in (what is now) northeast England. His people were “Britons”—one of the “Celtic” peoples then populating the British isles, though Patrick’s extended family were aristocratic people who had gone “Roman” during the Roman occupation of England. So Patrick was more culturally Roman than Celtic, and his first language was probably Latin, with some knowledge of the “Welsh” spoken by the lower classes. His family was Christian, indeed his grandfather was a priest. As a youth however, Patrick was only a nominal Christian and, by his later admission, he lived toward the wild side.

One day, when Patrick was 16, a band of Celtic pirates from (what is now) Ireland invaded the region where Patrick lived. They captured Patrick and many others, forced them onto a ship, sailed to Ireland, and sold them into slavery. The pirates sold Patrick to a prosperous tribal chief and druid named Miliuc (Miliuc moccu Boin), who put Patrick to work herding cattle.

Patrick experienced three profound changes during his years of enslavement. First, the periods when Patrick was isolated in the wilderness herding cattle impacted him spiritually. In his (more or less) autobiographical “Declaration” he tells us that¹

After I had arrived in Ireland, I found myself pasturing flocks daily, and I prayed a number of times each day. More and more the love and fear of God came to me, and faith grew and my spirit was exercised, until I was praying up to a hundred times every day—and in the

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night nearly as often.

Patrick became such a devout Christian that the change was obvious to his captors.

Second, Patrick was also changed in the time he spent with his captors. He came to understand the Irish Celtic people, and their language and culture, with the kind of intuitive profundity that is usually possible only, as in Patrick's case, from the "underside."

Third, Patrick came to love his captors. In *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill observes that Patrick's "love for his adopted people shines through his writings, and it is not just a generalized 'Christian' benevolence, but a love for individuals as they are. . . . He worries constantly for his people . . . Patrick has become an Irishman."²

One night, after six years of captivity, a voice spoke to Patrick in a dream—saying "You are going home. Look! Your ship is ready!" The voice directed him to flee for his freedom the next morning. He walked to a seacoast, saw the ship, and negotiated his way on board.

The data for piecing together the next quarter century of Patrick's story are scanty, and scholars have disagreed in interpreting what data we have, but the story line runs something like this. The ship probably took Patrick to Gaul, though perhaps to England. He may have spent considerable time in Gaul, he may have gone to Rome, he eventually returned to his people in England. He trained for the priesthood—perhaps in Rome, or in Gaul, more likely in England; his training immersed his mind in the scriptures, and grounded him in basic orthodox theology. He then served for years as a faithful parish priest in England.

One night, at the age of 48, Patrick experienced another dream that was to change his life again. An angel named Victor approached him with letters from his former captors in Ireland, and as he read one "I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, . . . and they cried out, as with one voice "'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us'."³

When Patrick awakened the next morning, he interpreted the dream as his "Macedonian Call" to take Christianity's gospel to the Celtic peoples of Ireland. He proposed, to his ecclesiastical superiors, that he be sent on this mission. The bishops of the British church, probably with the strong encouragement of Pope Ce-

lestine, affirmed Patrick's vision. Patrick was ordained a bishop, and appointed to Ireland, as history's first missionary to barbarians and history's first missionary bishop. The tradition tells us that he arrived in Ireland, with a modest entourage of priests, seminarians, and others, in 432 A.D.⁴

Patrick's mission to Ireland was to be such an unprecedented undertaking that it is impossible to understate its magnitude and significance. Why? Because the Irish Celtic peoples were "Barbarians."

The oldest and most perennial "issue" in the history of Christianity's world mission hangs upon two terms: "Christianizing" and "Civilizing." In a classic essay, Pierce Beaver tells us that mission leaders, including the Protestant mission leaders of the last several hundred years, have usually assumed that *the* two goals of a Christian mission are to "evangelize" a people and to "civilize" them. Beaver explains that, in the formative period of Protestant mission, there was never even⁵

debate about the legitimacy of the stress on the civilizing function of missions. Debate was only about priority; which came first, christianization or civilization? Some held that a certain degree of civilization was first necessary to enable a people to understand and accept the faith. Others argued that one should begin with christianization since the gospel inevitably produced a hunger for civilization. Most persons believed that the two mutually interacted and should be stressed equally and simultaneously.

In practice, a Protestant mission's "civilizing" objectives for a people were scripted by the specific customs of the sending nation. Beaver reports, for instance, that in the sixteenth to eighteenth century period of Spain's colonial expansion, "Spain . . . endeavored to transplant Christianity and civilization both according to the Spanish model."⁶ Likewise, the seventeenth century Puritan mission to Native American Indians organized converts into churches AND into "Christian towns"—in order to enculturate the Indians into what Cotton Mather called "a more decent and English way of living."⁷ Beaver reports that⁸

Even in countries with a high culture, such as India and China, European missionaries stressed the 'civilizing' objective as much as their brethren in primitive regions

because they regarded the local culture as degenerate and superstitious—a barrier to christianization.

The much earlier period of Roman Christianity's expansion, prior to Patrick, had struggled with these same issues but was afflicted by two, different, versions of this problem. The perspective of the ancient Roman Christian leaders can be baldly stated in two sentences: 1) Roman Christian leaders assumed that a population had to already be civilized "enough" to be christianized, i.e., that some degree of civilization was a prerequisite to christianization. 2) Once a sufficiently civilized population became Christian, they were expected in time to read and speak Latin, to adopt other Roman customs, and to do church "the Roman Way."

In regard to the first problem, Roman Christianity's mission had reached out, for three centuries, to the peoples of Europe that the church's leaders judged to be sufficiently civilized, and had never organized missions to the "barbarian" peoples, like the Celts, the Goths, and the Vikings, who lived at the fringes of the Roman Empire.⁹ Indeed, they assumed that reaching Barbarians was impossible; a population, by definition, had to be literate and rational enough to understand Christianity, and cultured and civil enough to become real Christians if they did understand it.

Why did the Roman church regard the Irish Celts as "Barbarians?" What could have given them that idea? The Romans did not know the Irish people. Ireland was geographically isolated from the Roman Empire; Rome had never conquered, or controlled, or even had a presence in Ireland.

Historically, however, Rome had observed some Celtic peoples. The history of the *Keltoi* peoples predated the Roman Empire by more than a thousand years. Celtic tribes had once been the dominant population of Europe, and they had been the greatest warriors of Europe. The European Celts were not a race, with a common genetic lineage, so much as a "macroculture," or a cultural and linguistic family of peoples. However, each tribe was distinct from the others, with its own gods, laws, customs, and language or dialect.¹⁰ Consequently, the Celtic tribes had little experience in organizing across tribal lines. So, in warfare, each Celtic tribe fought for itself, but was not organized to fight with other tribes against a common enemy.

An analogy should clarify this important point. A zoologist

once informed me that a tiger will defeat a lion in battle; but five lions will defeat five tigers—because the lions fight together and the tigers do not, so the five lions take on the five tigers—one at a time. The Celts were formidable tigers in battle, and greatly respected and feared. The Romans, whose strength in organization and coordination was unprecedented, were the lions in a lengthy series of battles with specific tribes to gradually establish and expand their empire. Over two centuries or so, the lions pushed the tigers westward to “the Celtic fringe” of western Europe—like Gaul, Brittany, and the British isles. In Patrick’s time, the British isles featured several Celtic peoples—most notably the Britons in (what is now) England, the Picts in (what is now) Scotland, and the Irish (or the Scots) in Ireland. In the two centuries following Patrick, hoards of the Irish invaded Scotland and absorbed the Picts—accounting for the term “Scotch-Irish,” and explaining the similarities in Scotch and Irish accents and culture to this day.

So the Romans had observed some Celtic peoples historically; indeed, Julius Caesar had even written about them. Furthermore, the Romans had heard many rumors about the Irish Celts. Why did the Romans think of the Celtic peoples, particularly the Irish, as “barbarians?” Well, the Romans tended to regard everyone who wasn’t culturally Roman as “barbarian”! Again, the Romans regarded literacy as a sure and certain sign of being civilized; the Irish Celts did not read and write, and were not interested. Then again, in warfare “all the Celts . . . stripped before battle and rushed their enemy naked, carrying sword and shield but wearing only sandals and torc—a twisted, golden neck ornament, . . .” while howling and, it seemed, possessed by demons!”¹¹ (Roman soldiers would have noticed that, and such news would have spread!) Furthermore, the Celts were known to decapitate some conquered enemy warriors,¹² and to practice human sacrifice in some of their religious rituals.¹³ So, for plausible reasons from their vantage point, the Romans stereotyped the Irish Celts as “barbarians,”¹⁴ and therefore probably unreachable. Nevertheless, by Patrick’s time there was some *interest*, especially at the papal level, in the possibility of reaching barbarians, and that is probably why Patrick’s Macedonian vision found support.

So Patrick’s mission to Ireland was unprecedented, and assumed to be probably impossible. The mission, however, almost certainly experienced an initial and continuing “boost.” Patrick

probably re-entered Ireland with the most remarkable credibility of any leader who ever undertook a frontier mission. We can easily imagine the rumor that would have spread across the Irish Celtic grapevines like wildfire: "Our slave Patrick has returned, at great personal risk, loving us and saying that the High God loves us." One critical incident especially indicates the contagion of this rumor and the power of this credibility. Patrick resolved, fairly early in his mission, to return to the region where he lived as a slave, to pay the bond money for his ransom to the druid Miliuc who had purchased him, and to commend the gospel to Miliuc. When Miliuc heard that Patrick was coming to see him, he took his own life in flames.¹⁵

Despite this remarkable credibility, which undoubtedly ensured him a hearing in many tribes, Patrick never "had it made" in this mission. Many druids and some tribal kings opposed him, sometimes with threats. His published "Declaration" mentions a couple of imprisonments, a re-enslavement experience or two, and "the twelve dangers which threatened me."¹⁶ Often, he had to pay for "protection" as he traveled. Yet his willingness to endure the danger for his mission would have fueled the apostle's continuing credibility.

The Irish context of that period did provide some strategic advantages for Patrick's mission. Ireland was populated by about "150 *tuaths*, or small kingships, each with fierce tribal and clan loyalty to their ruler."¹⁷ Ireland's total population numbered between 200,000 and 500,000 people.¹⁸ By Patrick's time, all of the tribes spoke the same language that Patrick had learned while a slave, and they now shared more or less the same culture.

Patrick, after years of reflection on how the Irish might be reached, now moved into mission. We do not know nearly all we would like to know about the mission approach and methods of Patrick and his entourage. At many points, his writings tantalize us more than they inform us. Moreover, we cannot be certain how much of the Celtic Christian movement's later approach in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Europe was pioneered and modeled by Patrick, and how much the approach was developed after him. But, from a handful of ancient sources¹⁹, we can piece together the following outline of a typical approach, which undoubtedly varied from one time and setting to another.

Patrick's entourage would have included a dozen or so people, including priests, seminarians, and two or three women.²⁰

Upon arrival at a tribal settlement, Patrick would engage the king and other opinion leaders, hoping for their conversion,²¹ or at least their clearance, to camp among the people and form into a community of faith in the midst of, or adjacent to, the tribal settlement.

The apostolic team would meet the people, engage them in conversation and in ministry, and look for people who appeared receptive. They would pray for sick people, and for possessed people, and they would counsel people and mediate conflicts. On at least one occasion, Patrick blessed a river, and prayed for the people to catch more fish. They would engage in some open air speaking, probably employing parable, story, poetry, song, visual symbols, visual arts, and perhaps drama to engage the Celtic people's remarkable imaginations. Often, we think, Patrick would receive the people's questions, and then speak to those questions collectively.²²

The apostolic band would probably welcome responsive people into their community of faith, to worship with them, pray with them, minister to them, converse with them, and break bread together.²³ One band member or another would probably join with each responsive person to reach out to relatives and friends. The mission team typically spent weeks, or months, as a ministering community of faith within the tribe. The church that emerged within the tribe would have been astonishingly indigenous, fully employing the cultural forms of the people's style, language, aesthetics, and music.

The Irish people would have experienced the Christian faith more as fulfillment than as destruction of their primal religion. While converts needed to repudiate their old gods for the Triune God of Christianity, parts of their primal religious tradition could be built upon and "christianized." So someone might paint a cross on the people's sacred standing stone, and their church might be built on their sacred mound or near their sacred well or grove. Their druids would no longer be their priests, but many druids became believers, and some in time became influential Christian priests. In time, many Christian priests and monks adopted clothing and a hairstyle reminiscent of the earlier druids.

If God blessed the efforts of Patrick's band and the people responded in faith, they built a church. Indeed, the salient goal of the mission to each settlement was to plant a church, and Patrick often led in the decision about its strategic location. Some-

times one or two members of the entourage would fan out and reach a nearby community. For instance, on one occasion, a young nun named Mathona, who was the sister of Benignus—who was Patrick's eventual successor, "went across the mountain . . . and founded a free church at Tamnach."²⁴ Sometimes, they would establish more than one church in the same settlement. The founding of a church would have involved a public service in which the church's first converts were baptized into the faith. When the apostolic entourage moved on, Patrick would leave one of his protégés behind to be the new church's priest, and one or two of their young people, who would one day be priests or nuns, would join the entourage as it moved on to another tribal settlement, to plant another church.

Patrick engaged in this group approach to apostolic ministry for 28 years, until his death around 460 A.D. As the movement grew, of course, more of his time was also devoted to administration, preparing and ordaining priests and, like Paul before him, visiting the churches he had planted. By this time, however, other leaders would be leading apostolic bands in missions to Celtic settlements.

What had Patrick and his people achieved in his 28-year mission to the "barbarian" Irish Celts? The question cannot be answered with mathematical precision, but estimates are possible. They baptized "many thousands" of people, probably tens of thousands. Tirechan refers, usually by name, to at least 55 churches that Patrick's team planted essentially in the one province of Connacht. Patrick is known to have also engaged in substantial ministry in the provinces of Leinster, Ulster, and Meath, with some apostolic forays quite beyond the northern provinces. An ancient document called the "Annals of the Four Masters" reports that Patrick's mission planted about 700 churches, and that Patrick ordained perhaps 1000 priests.²⁵ Within his lifetime, perhaps 20 to 30 (or more) of Ireland's 150 tribes became substantially Christian. Louis Gougaud offers this assessment:²⁶

Most certainly he did not succeed in converting all of the heathens of the island; but he won so many of them for Christ, he founded so many churches, ordained so many clerics, kindled such a zeal in men's hearts, that it seems right to believe that to him was directly due the wonderful out-blossoming of Christianity which distinguished Ireland in the following ages.

Patrick's achievement included notable social dimensions. He was the first public man to speak and crusade against slavery. Within his lifetime, or soon after, "the Irish slave trade came to a halt, and other forms of violence, such as murder and inter-tribal warfare decreased", and his communities modeled the Christian way of faithfulness, generosity, and peace to all the Irish.²⁷

One would naturally assume that the British Church, which had ordained Patrick a bishop and sent him to Ireland, continued to support his mission and celebrate its achievements. This was far from the case, however, at least in the generation of British Episcopal leaders who succeeded the bishops who originally sent him. Some of them, perhaps most, criticized him savagely. This criticism stung, and aroused Patrick to write the "Declaration" that basically defended his ministry. What was the "beef" of the British church leaders? They seem to have defined two roles (only) for a bishop of the Church: administrator and chaplain. Therefore, a bishop's primary (perhaps only) job was to administer the existing churches and care for faithful Christians. So the British leaders were offended and angered that Patrick was spending priority time with "pagans," "sinners," and "barbarians." Patrick seized the high ground, and reminded his detractors of his distinctive calling and of the Great Commission and other biblical warrants for priority outreach to pre-Christian populations.²⁸

God . . . gave me this great boon: that through me many heathen shall be reborn in God, and that afterwards they should be confirmed as Christians, so that everywhere clergy should be ordained for a population newly coming to the faith, a population which the Lord redeemed from the ends of the earth, just as He had promised through his prophets: "The nations will come to you from the ends of the earth and will say 'How empty are the idols which our forefathers erected and they are of no use'", and again: "I have placed you as a light among the nations so that you may bring salvation even to the end of the earth." . . .

Therefore . . . there is an obligation to fish well and diligently, as the Lord commanded, saying: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." . . . From which we are obliged to spread our nets so that we can catch a great

shoal and multitude for God. And there should be clergy everywhere to baptize and preach to a population which is in need and longs for what it lacks, as the Lord says in the Gospel, where He admonishes and teaches, telling us: "Now therefore, go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and then—see—I will be with you all days until the very end of the world."

And again He says: "Going therefore out into the whole world, preach the Gospel to all of creation: whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; they who do not believe will be condemned.

And again: "This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all peoples; and then the end will come."

And the Lord also foretells through the prophet, saying: "And in the last days", says the Lord, "I will pour out My Spirit over all flesh" . . .

And in Hosea, He says: "A people that is not Mine I will call my people, . . . and . . . they will be called children of the living God."

So this is why it come about in Ireland that people who had no acquaintance with God, but who, up to now, always had cults or idols and abominations, are recently—by this dispensation—made a people of the Lord and are known as children of God. . . .

As was to occur much later in the history of Methodism following John Wesley, Christianity spread even more in the generations following the death of Patrick than it had in Patrick's own lifetime. Since we have no written record of that period, our knowledge of how the church grew in that period is meager, but one fact is paramount: A type of "monastic community" displaced the parish church as Irish Christianity's dominant form of Christian community. While Patrick's leadership had "indigenized" Christianity to Irish cultural soil much more than anyone else was attempting anywhere, organizationally he had planted traditional parish churches, each with a priest, with groups of churches administered overall by a bishop, like the established Roman way of "doing church."

However, the parish church model did not fit ancient Irish life, because the Roman model presupposed an organized town or village—with a parish church at the town's center; and the Roman model presupposed a network of towns, connected by roads, within a geographical political unit (like a county) that could double as a bishop's diocese. Celtic Ireland had no established towns however, only temporary settlements of tribal groups. Ireland had no official political units or boundaries. Furthermore, Ireland had few if any roads more useful than a Class B cow trail!²⁹ Much of the "traffic" was confined to the sea lanes. A modern visitor who stepped back in time into fourth century Ireland would observe random, gradually shifting, "rural sprawl" in every direction.

Patrick's successors adopted his principle of indigenous Christianity, and extended it. They learned about "monasteries" from Eastern Christianity, then they radically adapted the idea to Ireland. The resulting community was so different from the eastern monasteries that we need a different term for them, such as "monastic communities."

What was the difference between eastern monasteries and Celtic monastic communities? Briefly, the eastern monasteries organized to protest, and withdraw from, a corrupt established Church; the Celtic monasteries organized to extend the faith and church. The eastern monks withdrew from the world into a monastery to save and cultivate their own souls; Celtic leaders often organized a monastic community to save other people's souls. The leaders of the eastern monasteries located their monasteries in isolated locations, off the beaten track; the Celtic Christians built their monastic communities in locations that were very accessible to the traffic of the time, like proximity to settlements, or on hill tops, or on islands near the established sea lanes.³⁰

Celtic monastic communities did feature some monks, and/or nuns, who lived disciplined ascetic lives; such monks and nuns often founded monastic communities, but Celtic communities were much more diverse than eastern monasteries. They were also populated by priests, teachers, scholars, craftsmen, artists, farmers, families, and children, as well as monks and/or nuns—all under the leadership of a lay abbot or abbess.

Monastic communities were beehives of various activities. With some variation from one community to another, children went to school, young men and women prepared for Christian

vocations, and Christian scholarship was fostered. Some inhabitants copied decaying books onto new parchments, others “illuminated” the scriptures, and others practiced other arts. Other people herded cows, or sheared sheep, or made cloth, or cultivated crops, or cooked for the community, or cared for sick people, or sick animals, or guests. The community worshipped together, twice daily; they learned much of the scriptures together—by heart, especially the psalms; and many monastic communities also functioned as “mission stations”—preparing people for mission to unreached populations.

Some of the ways in which the Celtic community differed from an eastern cloistered monastery would have been obvious upon entering one. Once the visitor passed beyond the wall and through the gate that signified hallowed ground, one would notice (say, as at Glendalough) a porter’s dwelling, a cathedral, several chapels, a round tower, one or more tall stone celtic crosses, a cemetery, a well, the abbot’s house, a guest house, many small cells for one or two people, larger dwellings for families, a cooking facility, a dining hall, a scriptorium, a library, farm land, grazing land, etc. All of this would appear quite planned and organized—in two or more concentric circles. The perceptive visitor would appreciate that the Celtic Christian movement had *created* community in the midst of rural sprawl!

The Celtic Christian Movement proceeded to multiply such mission-sending monastic communities, while continuing to send teams into settlements to multiply churches. In two or three generations, all of Ireland had become substantially Christian.

Within a century after Patrick’s death, Irish Celtic Christians were lifting their eyes to see harvests beyond Ireland. In 563 A.D., an entourage accompanied Columba, a formidable apostolic leader, to the island called Iona, off of Scotland’s west coast—which served as their base for reaching the Picts of Scotland. Again, with appropriate adaptations for reaching a different people, Celtic Christianity multiplied monastic communities which sent out teams to engage settlements and plant churches. Within a century, the Picts were substantially Christian.

By the early seventh century, the demographics of northern and central England had changed. Swarms of Angles, Saxons, Jutes and other Germanic peoples, (known, collectively, as the “Anglo-Saxons” or simply “Angles”) invaded the land and drove many of the Britons to Brittany (where they became known as “Bretons”), or to Wales (where they became known as

the “Welsh”). The Britons who stayed were absorbed into Anglo-Saxon culture. In 633 A.D., Iona commissioned an entourage led by Aidan to establish a monastic community on a tidal island called Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, off the coast of northeast England. Ian Bradley observes that Aidan’s community “was to prove almost as important a missionary centre as its mother house at Iona. From it monks penetrated far down into the areas of England held by the pagan Angles and Saxons.”³¹

The mission of Aidan and his people represented the third major strategic adjustment in the history of Celtic Christian expansion. Patrick and his people, who were Britons from England, had adapted their mission to fit the culture of the pagan Irish Celts. Columba and his people, all Irish, had adjusted to the somewhat different language and culture of the Celtic Picts in Scotland. Now Aidan and his people, most of them Irish, were in cross-cultural mission to the Germanic Anglo-Saxons in England—people with a very different language, culture, and primal religion. Henry Mayr-Harting explains that, “As all the Germanic peoples had issued ultimately from Scandinavia, so they shared a common stock of mythology with the Scandinavians.”³²

In broad outline, the strategy of Aidan and his people looks familiar: First, multiply monastic communities. We have no way of knowing how many such communities the movements spawned by Patrick, Columba, Aidan and others established in the British isles alone. John Finney cites evidence showing 32 monastic communities in the area of Worcester; that density would indicate hundreds, more likely a thousand or more, of monastic communities across the British isles.³³

Second, send apostolic teams from the monastic community to reach settlements within the region. Finney observes that the monastic community was led by an abbot or abbess, while the apostolic team was often led by a bishop. In the Celtic Christian movement, “the bishops performed the sacramental actions peculiar to their order, such as ordination, but above all were the leaders of evangelistic missions into the surrounding countryside and to the local secular leadership.”³⁴ The team would engage in sustained group visits to settlements, minister with the people, interpret the gospel in indigenous ways, and plant churches.

Aidan and his people were able to build on the efforts of Paulinus (and others) who preceded them in Northumbria.³⁵ Nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxons were not reached quickly and

easily. Mayr-Harting reports that³⁶

The Anglo-Saxons . . . were not converted at all quickly. . . It took nearly 90 years to convert just the kings and the greater part of their aristocracy, not to speak of the countryside which was a question of centuries. In the course of that near-90 years hardly a court was converted which did not suffer at least one subsequent relapse into paganism before being reconverted.

In the period in which England's demographics were changing due to the Anglo-Saxon occupation, the demographics of Western Europe were changing even more. "Barbarian" Germanic populations like the Goths had pressured and invaded the Roman Empire for decades while, from multiple causes,³⁷ the Empire was also crumbling from within. Rome itself fell to a military invasion in 410 A.D., and a series of events brought about what historians have called "the Dark Ages"—in which the "Barbarian" hoards largely destroyed "Roman Civilization."

Celtic Christian leaders believed, however, that they had learned something about reaching "barbarians" with the gospel. An Irish apostle named Columbanus, with an entourage, departed for Europe in 600 A.D. to launch a Celtic Christian mission to the continent. In the next 15 years, he founded monastic communities in (what is now) France, Switzerland, and Italy, and in time his people founded a vast network of monastic communities, learned a dozen or more languages and cultures, engaged peoples, planted churches, and launched a significant Christian movement among the "barbarian" peoples of Europe. In the first half of the eighth century, Boniface—an Anglo-Saxon Christian employing (more or less) Celtic methods of mission, provided an additional generation of leadership that, in time, enabled the Germanic peoples of Europe to become substantially Christian.

Through several generations of sustained mission, Celtic Christianity thus re-evangelized Europe, brought Western Europe out of the Dark Ages, fueled the Carolingian Renaissance under Charlemagne, and ushered in the "Holy Roman Empire." Even those Celtic Christians who did not venture out, but stayed at the monasteries, played an indispensable role. By laboring, in their scriptoria, to copy the learning of the past onto new parchment, they preserved for posterity much of the classic literature of Greece and Rome. So that, in the words of Thomas Cahill, is

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“How the Irish Saved Civilization!” While the Roman branch of the Church had long stopped growing, the mission of the Celtic branch had rescued and restored movemental Christianity in Europe.

You would think that the Roman wing of the Church would have been grateful for the expansion achieved by the mission of the Celtic wing, and it was—begrudgingly; but the Roman branch’s leaders repeatedly criticized the Celts for not doing church the “Roman way!” The two wings of the Church came into focused conflict at the Synod of Whitby in 664 A.D., called by the regional King Oswiu, as reported in the Venerable *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.³⁸ They conflicted over two apparently superficial issues: 1) By their contrasting method of calculating the date for Easter, the Celtic churches were often celebrating Easter on a different date than Rome prescribed. 2) The hair style of the Celtic priests and monks contrasted with the “tonsure” of Roman priests and monks. The two sides expounded their views at the Synod of Whitby. The Romans arrived much better organized and prepared and, once again, the lions defeated the tigers. King Oswiu sided with the Roman case and ruled that the Roman approach should replace the Celtic approach everywhere. In 670 AD, a synod at Autun in France ruled that the Celtic monastic communities across Europe had to adopt the (Roman) Benedictine rule.³⁹

The real issues, of course, ran much deeper than hairstyle, and a date for Easter, and the norms for life in Christian communities. The real issues were conformity, control, and doing church the “Roman Way.” Once any people became Christians, the politically dominant Roman wing of the church became very concerned that the people learn to worship in Latin, sing the music from Rome, etc. The synods of Whitby and Autun presumably settled the matter; the Roman way should be followed everywhere. In some cases, Celtic priests who refused to do church the Roman way were banished; in some cases, Benedictine rule was forced on Celtic monasteries.⁴⁰ More often, presumably, church and secular leaders simply pressured Celtic leaders to conform, and praised and rewarded those who did. Within two centuries of the synods at Whitby and Autun, the Roman Way largely prevailed throughout the Western Church; and the heroic Celtic era of mission would soon end (although pockets of Celtic folk Catholicism have continued in areas of Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and the Outer Hibernides until today.) The

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introduction of the Roman Way, virtually everywhere, undermined mission for centuries—until its revival, half a millennium later, in the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Bede's history of the monasteries at Wearmouth and Jarrow, in northeast England, is mercilessly revealing.⁴¹ Bede's version of this specialized history begins with the story of the abbot Benedict who⁴²

. . . went to Rome, where, in fulfillment of his long and ardent desire, he made sure he visited the tombs of the apostles and venerated their remains. Directly he returned home he devoted himself wholeheartedly and unceasingly to making known as widely as possible the forms of church life which he had seen in Rome and had come to love and cherish.

Doing church the Roman way was, transparently, Benedict's obsession, and Bede's as well. His history of the two monasteries reports frequent travel, by abbots and monks, to and from Rome. They visit shrines in Rome, they observe how churches in Rome do church, and they send their bishop to be consecrated in Rome. They frequently stock their libraries with books from Rome, they bring paintings and sacred relics from Rome. They build a "stone church in the Roman style."⁴³ At one point, Benedict brought a choirmaster from Rome named John, who "taught the monks at first hand how things were done in the churches in Rome."⁴⁴

So Bede reports and applauds, at incredible length, the ways in which the two monasteries learned to do everything as in Rome. However, by Bede's account, neither community in this period engages in any mission to pagan populations nor engages in any ministry or witness to seekers outside or inside either monastery. (If they did, Bede thought it not worth reporting.) Wearmouth and Jarrow adopted the Roman way and the Eastern agenda; their monks enter the community's discipline to save their own souls, not the souls of others.

In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, we observe the non-growing (Roman) wing of the church assuming that it knew better than the growing (Celtic) wing, and we see the non-growing wing working overtime to control the growing wing and make it conform to the non-growing wing's way of "doing church." I have reported this drama of ecclesiastical control at some length because we observe a parallel case in most of

the “mainline” denominations of the USA, especially those denominations once “born in Europe” and exported to “the colonies.” In most American denominations, including mine, the wing who is certain that a *European* way of doing church is best are also the people who assume that they know best, and are the same people who put in the most overtime to influence, and control, the denomination. Their special obsession is to control and “correct” the growing wing of the church!

By the time, however, the Roman wing succeeded in co-opting the Celtic wing, the latter had succeeded in reaching the West for a second time.

What can now be known about *how* Celtic Christianity “won the West” for the second time is an appropriate topic for a book length treatment that would unpack the multiple strategic causes for Celtic Christian expansion. We focus, now, on how the Celtic way of “being and doing church” contributed to the re-evangelization of Europe in the centuries before the Roman Way eclipsed it. Four themes suggest what we might learn about “missionary ecclesiology” from the ancient Celtic Christian movement.

First, in contrast to our usual approaches of “Lone Ranger” one-to-one evangelism, or confrontational evangelism, or the public preaching crusade, we have already seen how the Celtic Christians usually evangelized as a team—relating to the people of a settlement, identifying with the people, engaging in friendship, conversation, ministry, and witness for some time, with the goal of raising up a church in measurable time. John Finney reports that the Celts believed in “the importance of the team. A group of people can pray and think together. They inspire and encourage one another. The single entrepreneur is too easily prey to self doubt and loss of vision.”⁴⁵

The second theme focuses on how the monastic community prepared people of depth and compassion to live as Christians and to be in mission. Celtic Christianity prepared people through a fivefold structure of experiences. 1) You experienced voluntary periods of solitary isolation, ordinarily in a primitive cell erected within a remote natural setting—like a grove of trees near a stream. Celtic leaders advised you to “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”⁴⁶ 2) You spent time with your *anamchara*, i.e., your “soul friend”—not a superior like a “spiritual director”, but a peer with whom you experienced affinity and strength, with whom you were willing to be vulner-

able. 3) If the monastic community was at all large, you spent time with a small group of ten or fewer people—led by someone chosen primarily for their devout qualities.⁴⁷ 4. You participated in the common life, meals, work, learning, biblical recitation, prayers, and worship of the whole monastic community. 5. Through your small group, and the community's life, and perhaps as a soul friend, you observed and gained experience in ministry and witness to pre-Christian people. The community's purposes for you, through this fivefold structure, were to root your memory in the gospel and in much of the scriptures, to help you experience a vivid awareness of the presence of the Triune God and a life of prayer and spiritual power, to help you discover and fulfill your vocation, to facilitate your ministry in accordance with your gifts and the community's needs, challenges, and mission, and to give you experience in ministry with seekers.

The third theme is the role of the monastic community's hospitality in ministry with seekers, visitors, refugees, and other "guests." While one Celtic approach to pre-Christian people was for a team from the monastic community to penetrate the natural community of the target population, another was to invite seekers, refugees and others, individuals and even families, to be guests of the monastic community.

Put yourself in the place of a seeker, or a refugee, or an abused teenager, who has been invited to visit a monastic community, and you had now found your way there. What would you likely experience?⁴⁸ You would meet a "porter" stationed near the monastic community's entrance, whose chief role is to welcome guests and introduce them to the rest of the community.⁴⁹ The Abbot, and everyone else, would welcome you with "all courtesy of love;" they would read a scripture for you, and offer a prayer for you, followed by the "kiss of peace." The abbot would wash your feet (from your journey by foot), and would show you to the guest house—which would be managed by a caring brother who would give you bedding. You would be included at the Abbot's table at meals; if the Abbot was in a period of fasting, he would break the fast—for the Abbot has no higher priority than ministry with guests. You would learn that the monastic community's highest commitment is hospitality to strangers, seekers, pilgrims, and refugees. The Benedictine Rule #53 explains that "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: 'I was a stranger and

you welcomed me' (Mt. 25:40)." Soon you would likely be assigned a soul friend, and a small group, and a place for periods of solitude. You would learn some scripture, and you would worship with the community. One or more persons would share the ministry of conversation, and pray with you, daily. After some days, or weeks, you would find yourself believing what these Christians believe, and they would invite you to commit your life to Christ and His will for your life.

The fourth, and final, theme follows from the third and focuses more explicitly on the role of the seeker's experience of the Christian community in the process of his or her conversion. This theme represents the major contribution of John Finney's pioneering book *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission*.⁵⁰ Finney's book does us the service of contrasting the Roman Way of doing mission and evangelism vis-a-vis the Celtic Way.

Bluntly stated, the Roman model for reaching people (who are "civilized" enough to respond within the model) is: 1) Present the Christian message; 2) Invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; 3) If they decide positively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship. The Roman model seems very logical to us because most American evangelicals are scripted by it! We explain the gospel, they accept Christ, we welcome them into the church! Presentation, Decision, Assimilation. What could be more logical than that?

But you already know enough to infer the (contrasting) Celtic model for reaching people: You 1) *first* establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. 2) Within fellowship, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship. 3) In time, as they discover that they now believe, you invite them to commit.

We can contrast the two models on a chart:

<u>Roman Model</u>	<u>Celtic Model</u>
Presentation	Fellowship
Decision	Ministry and Conversations
Fellowship	Belief, invitation to Commitment

The Celtic model reflects the adage that, for most people, "Christianity is more caught than taught!"

I began discovering what we now call the Celtic approach in my field research with converts out of secularity into faith. In interviews, I usually ask new believers this question: "When did you feel like you really belonged, that you were welcomed and

included, in the fellowship of this church?" More and more converts, including a majority of "boomer" converts and a large majority of "buster" converts, comment that they felt like that *before* they believed, and before they officially joined. Indeed, many new believers report that the experience of the fellowship *enabled* them to believe, and to commit. For many people, I discovered the faith is about three-fourths caught and one-fourth taught.

My cautious conclusions about how most people become Christians were reinforced by a more empirical study sponsored by the United Bible Societies in Great Britain—led and written by John Finney. A research team received 360 completed questionnaires from converts, and they interviewed 151 converts. These 511 converts represented the range of denominations in England, from Anglican Roman Catholic, to "Free Churches" and the "New Churches." *In Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?*⁵¹ Finney reports that most people experience the faith through relationships, that they encounter the gospel through a community of faith, that becoming a Christian involves a process that takes time. In his later book, *Recovering the Past*, Finney summarizes their chief finding in four words. For most people, "belonging comes before believing."

Finney, and others, believe that we are now rediscovering the approach to mission first pioneered by ancient Celtic Christianity. Finney contends that the Celtic Way is more effective with post-modern Western populations than the Roman Way (and its more recent version—the traditional evangelical way). His data shows that more people come to faith gradually (the Celtic model) than suddenly (the Roman Model). Furthermore, the ongoing contagious common life of the congregation that permits people to discover faith for themselves, at their own pace, now appears to be much more influential than special event preaching evangelism. Finney asks⁵²

What is a typical modern journey of faith? The details are as diverse as the number of individuals but the research showed that a frequently used pathway is:

- X is introduced into the church through a member of their family, through friendship with some Christians or through a minister;
- they begin to ask questions;
- they are invited to explore further and come to a

knowledge and practice of the faith (often this is through a nurture group or some form of catechumenate);

- they discover they have become a Christian, and mark it publicly through baptism or confirmation or whatever is appropriate to their denomination.

Professor Robin Gill sums it up when he says, 'Belonging comes before believing.' . . . Evangelism is about helping people to belong so that they can believe. . . .

The changes are all moving from a Roman to a Celtic model.

So the ancient Celtic wing of the Church was more community than organization, more base community than bureaucracy, more movement than institution. As we reflect on the ancient Celtic wing's community based approach to mission, I think there are (at least) four questions they would ask us as we prepare for mission to the West in the twenty-first century.

1. "What churches are sending *teams* of people, for ministry and witness, into enemy territory? Your earlier pattern of sending individuals, or pairs, was not an approach that you could sustain, was it?"
2. "For that matter, who is doing much proactive outreach at all? We have observed, from our place in the grandstand, that—in most cities—even the most growing churches only respond to people who take the initiative to visit the church."
3. "Do you know how *important* it might be when a visitor, from the community, suddenly visits your worship service. Their visit is often the most misperceived signal in your churches today, and your most neglected opportunity. What would a thought-out thorough ministry of Christian Hospitality look like in your culture today?"
4. "Are you at all interested in reaching the secular New Barbarians who are now multiplying in all of your communities? Your communities now have many people who don't even know what you are talking about, who aren't always civilized or even nice, who may have unshined shoes, or body odor, or grease under their fingernails, who may be in the grips of addiction, who have

never acquired a “church etiquette.” We have observed that most of your churches never reach out to people who are not “refined” enough to feel comfortable with you, or to people whose lives are too out of control for you to feel comfortable with them! Nevertheless, they are probably the most receptive population in your ministry area. If you decide to reach the “new barbarians,” you will do it something like we did!

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NOTES

1. From Liam de Paor’s translation of “St. Patrick’s Declaration,” in Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick’s World: The Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) p. 99.

2. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) p. 109.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. Virtually no two scholars are able to agree on St. Patrick’s key dates! R. P. C. Hanson presents the most comprehensive and judicious discussion that I have found. Essentially, Hanson calculates probable dates upon external evidence. For instance, Patrick’s career presumably took place after the translation and dissemination of the version of the Bible that he uses, and before the conversion of the Franks—whom Patrick refers to as pagans in his “Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus.” By such reasoning, Hanson pegs Patrick’s birth at around 390, his kidnapping in 406, his escape in 412, and his death around 460. Hanson

estimates that Patrick went to Ireland as apostolic bishop sometime between 425 and 435. This suggests that the traditional date for Patrick's entry into Ireland, 432, is as good as any other for the purposes of this study. See R. P. C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career* (Oxford University Press, 1968) pp. 171-188.

5. R. Pierce Beaver, "The History of Mission Strategy," in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, revised edition (William Carey Library) 1992, p. B-66.

6. *Ibid.*, p. B-59.

7. Quoted in Beaver, *op. cit.*, p. B-62.

8. *Ibid.*, p. B-65.

9. Ralph Winter shows that when the Roman Church refused outreach to the "Barbarian" Goths, the Goths proceeded to overwhelm the Church and the "Christian" lands militarily. Later, the neglected Vikings overwhelmed the church lands again. Still later, the invasions of Muslim armies wreaked havoc in Christian lands. See Ralph D. Winter, "The Kingdom Strikes Back: The Ten Epochs of Redemptive History," in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, revised edition (Carey Library, 1992) pp. B-3 to B-21..

10. See Nigel Pennick, *The Sacred World of the Celts* (HarperCollins, 1997) p. 10

11. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, p. 82.

Nora Chadwick, in *The Celts*, revised edition (Penguin Books, Ltd., 1997) p. 138—explains that "In warfare, as in so many other aspects of Celtic life, there appear to have been superficial overtones, as is suggested by the *gaesatae* who fought naked in obedience to an archaic ritual tradition which apparently taught that nudity afforded some supernatural protection." That deeper meaning behind a nude army's appearance would not have been apparent to opposing armies!

12. See Nora Chadwick, *The Celts*, pp. 53, 139.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

14. Patrick, in the years of his enslavement, would have discovered that the Celts had a far more sophisticated, and even "civilized", culture than their "public image" suggested. He became familiar with their art, music, poetry, and story telling. He knew that they did not read *by choice*; they valued their strength as an oral, and rather intellectual, culture. Their lawyers and their "bards" (the story tellers who perpetuated their oral history) trained for 12 years; their druids trained for 20 years.

15. "Muirchu's Life of St. Patrick", in *Saint Patrick's World*, 180-181.

16. See "Saint Patrick's Declaration" in *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 102.

17. Ian Bradley, *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent*. (Wild Goose Publications, 1996) p. 20.

18. Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 23.

19. I found four ancient sources most useful—St. Patrick's "Decla-

ration" and his "Letter Against the Soldiers of Coroticus", Muirchu's "Life of St. Patrick," and Tirechan's seventh century collection of local traditions about Patrick's mission. All of these sources, and others, are now in excellent English translation and in one volume—Liam de Paor's *Saint Patrick's World*, already cited.

20. This reflects the company of people that accompanied Patrick to Selc in Tirechan's collection of local traditions about Patrick's mission (see *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 166). On another occasion, Patrick's entourage consisted of "a crowd of priests, deacons, exorcists, porters and lectors, as well as boys whom he ordained." (p. 155.)

21. Louis Gouddard, who wrote a comprehensive pioneering text on Celtic Christianity in the 1930's, tells us that "We find Patrick everywhere setting himself first of all to convert the great." One reason, Gouddard says, for focusing on the king was that the king owned all the property, so the king had to give the land needed for a church. See Louis Gouddard, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their origin, their development, influence and mutual relations*. (Sheed and Ward, 1932) pp. 38-39.

22. "Bishop Tirechan's Account of St. Patrick's Journey," in *Saint Patrick's World*, pp. 163-165, seems to represent one such public conversation as typical of Patrick's approach.

23. We do not know if the Christian band would have offered the Eucharist to seekers, but I would not be astonished to learn that they did. Much later, John Wesley and eighteenth century Methodism were to view the sacrament as a "converting ordinance" and welcome seekers to the Lord's Supper.

24. "Bishop Tirechan's Account of St. Patrick's Journey, in *Saint Patrick's World*, 163.

25. In *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 129.

26. *Christianity in Celtic Lands*, p. 44-45.

27. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, p. 110.

28. From "St. Patrick's Declaration" in *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 103-104.

29. For such background insights, see *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 23.

30. Philip Sheldrake, in *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (Cowley Publications, 1996), acknowledges the common assumption that Celtic monastic communities were usually located "in wild and isolated places" (p. 22), but he demonstrates that the location was usually selected for access, not for seclusion. Indeed, he contends, "Nearly all the major sites that grew into important monasteries are in fact on major travel routes or at least, in terms of ancient human geography, in relatively accessible places (p. 28).

31. Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1993) p. 21.

32. See *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London;

B. T. Batsford, 1972) pp. 26. See pp. 22-30 for Mayr-Harting's full discussion of Anglo-Saxon paganism.

33. John Finney, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (Dartmouth, Longman, & Todd, 1996) p. 65.

34. *Recovering the Past*, p. 55.

35. See Book II of Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford University Press, 1994) for Bede's account of the ministry of Paulinus. Bede reports in the later ministry of Aidan in Book III.

36. *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 29.

37. For a recent, and comprehensive, analysis of the fall of Rome, see chapter I, "The End of the World: How Rome Fell—and Why" in Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

38. Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby is featured primarily in Book III, chapter 25 of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, though he discussed the issues focused in the synod in many places.

39. This history is discussed in Nigel Pinnick, *The Sacred World of the Celts* (HarperCollins, 1997) pp. 94-95.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

41. D. H. Farmer, tr., Bede, "The Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow", in *The Age of Bede* (Penguin, 1988) pp. 185-208.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

45. *Recovering the Past*, p. 67.

46. Attributed to an Egyptian abbot named Moses, quoted in Esther de Wall, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996) p. 87.

47. Small groups were prescribed in Rule #21 of The Benedictine Rule, as follows: "If the community is rather large, some brothers chosen for their good repute and holy life should be made deans. They will take care of their groups of ten, managing all affairs according to the commandments of God and the order of their abbot. The deans selected should be the kind of men with whom the abbot can confidently share the burdens of his office."

48. Much of the approach which follows is delineated in "The Rule of St. Benedict." For a recent English translation of Benedict's Rule, and an excellent commentary, see Esther de Wall, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996). Father Michael Rodgers, co-author with Marcus Losack of *Glendalough: A Celtic Pilgrimage* (Morehouse Publishing, 1996) informs me that the Celtic monastic communities so substantially influenced the Benedictine monasteries on the continent that, in the ministry of Hospitality, the published Benedictine Rule would reflect the ministry pattern of the Celtic communities.

49. Rule 66 of the Benedictine Rule provides that "At the door of

the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. The porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them."

50. John Finney, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1996).

51 John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992).

52. *Finding Faith Today*, pp. p. 46-47.