

Celtic Studies : Exploring the History, Heart, and Practices of the Early Celtic Church

CELTIC STUDIES

The History, Heart, and Practices
of the early Celtic Church

By Rebecca Friedlander

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1

INTRODUCTION: DISCOVERING THE CELTIC WAY

What are we studying?

The Celtic golden era of 400-665 AD, the preceding history, and the aftermath of that era.

We will talk about:

- the powerful move of God that took place in Ireland and how it spread through Europe
- the most prominent male and female leaders during that time
- fascinating practices of the church that changed entire nations within several generations
- applications for both private spirituality and today's church

Author Robert Van de Weyer said in his book Celtic Fire:

The Irish church was the jewel of Celtic Christianity, producing its finest poets, its most heroic saints, and its bravest evangelists.

Our goal is to mine those jewels and bring them with us.

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Who is Rebecca?

- Author and film maker, I have written and filmed extensively on Celtic church history.
- 19 years of full time ministry and the creative arts.
- I have a BA in Christian Creative Arts and, by this time, a masters in Celtic Studies from the Evangelical Episcopal University and Seminary.
- In 2017, I went to Ireland on one-way ticket to create the film *Celtic Pilgrimage*.
- I have spent much time in Ireland, Scotland, and England interviewing scholars, visiting sites, leading a tour, and interacting with pastors and leaders.
- Film released in and touring the British Isles.
- An American viewpoint offers a bird's eye view of Celtic history.
- I am also leading a ministry inspired by Celtic spirituality called "The Potter's House."

Why is this study important?

- Takeaways for church and personal growth.

Personal -something for everyone

- A very holistic approach to spirituality. Much like Jewish faith: they prayed over everything!
- Deep intimacy with God and healthy community
- Many takeaways, different people have unique touch points

Tracy Balzer, Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity:

...Christian Celts practiced an experiential, holistic expression of faith – a striking contrast to our modern lives which tend to be chopped up into parts: sacred and secular; church and work, worship and “real life.” This ancient Celtic expression for faith presented me a lively and engaging way of what Brother Laurence called “Practicing the Presence of God” while remaining Biblically grounded and fiercely Trinitarian. I was hooked.

Michael Mitton, Restoring the Woven Cord:

I discovered something I had been searching for during the past 20 years. I had been searching for an expression of faith in which I could own the various strands that have become so important to me. I discovered a burning and evangelical love for the Bible; I discovered a depth of spiritual life and stillness that I had encountered in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality; I discovered a radical commitment to the poor and God's creation, and I discovered the most attractive expression of charismatic life I had yet encountered.

We need to study the early Celtic church in the spirit of its Christian life-- with total openness to the wind of the Spirit, who may well draw our attention to strands of our Christian faith that we have too easily ignored or discarded... for instance... it would be wrong to delight in the miraculous stories of healing without studying the believers' commitment to community, the context for the healing ministry. We will need to explore with a great sense of openness.

Church applications:

- In the Celtic church, we see a revival that didn't "peter out." Celtic spirituality was a way of life that sustained a move of God.

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- The Celtic church has been called “the closest to the first century church.”
- Even when this movement exploded, the church stayed organic and relational.

Ian Bradley, Colonies of Heaven:

Indeed, it has been calculated that more saints apparently lived on that small island in two centuries than the rest of the world in the entire period since.

When, in the 11th and 12th centuries, the rest of Europe gradually assumed universal Catholic saints, Ireland and Britain continued to venerate local saints, the great majority of whom came from the ‘golden age’ of Celtic Christianity.

- Personal Discipleship: this way of spirituality produced saints of Christ, not just followers of church.
- It was a move of God, but also more than that: it created an environment for maturity to happen.
- Community with purpose, like the church in the Book of Acts.
- Discipleship: communities that looked like Jesus and his twelve disciples.

Ray Simpson in Exploring Celtic Spirituality:

They were not empire-builders – and their buildings illustrate this. In Ireland, numbers grew so fast that massive church building was called for. They did not build large churches, with aisles, as the Western church often did. They followed the pattern of the Eastern Church, which was to multiply the number of buildings but keep them small. No Irish church known to have been built between the fifth and twelfth centuries is more than sixty feet long, and most are much less. The favorite number for a fellowship unit was seven small churches.

How will we study?

- We will reference a variety of sources and have 4 books to read, and two films to watch. These will require a report from the student. We will also offer optional resources for further study, which are not required to complete the class.
- We will attempt to remove “rose-colored glasses” and look at this piece of history based on reliable sources, rather than myths and legends.
- What about Wales? St. David of Wales was a Celtic saint, but oldest surviving documents are 500 years after death. Therefore we opted to go with reliable sources for our study.
- Many historians agree that the Celtic church was not under the rule of Rome at this time, so we will be viewing this history through a Celtic lens rather than a Catholic one. While respecting the Catholic church, we will also discover how this position helps us discern between fact and fiction in this era. We view these parts of the church as territories, not denominations. We will be looking deeper to see the forces behind each movement.
- We will be opting to study with the grid of Christianity, rather than paganism. While many people believe the Celtic saints to be mixed with paganism of their times, we believe an honest look at historical documents shows us that they were solid believers, and Biblically grounded. Many accounts tell how they often came into conflict with the Druids and pagan customs of their times, revealing an authentic pursuit of Christ and his kingdom.
- Our goal is to catch the heartbeat of what God was doing in history and apply the truths to our lives today.

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Why is this study important?

God used the Celtic church in a powerful way, and it has been called the closest church to the first century in both practice and power. In the history of the Celtic church, we discover a rich goldmine of spirituality with practices that can enrich our personal walk with Christ and offer inspiration for the way we practice church today.

At a gathering on Iona in 1991, hermit priest Martin Reith said:

As we turn our attention to our forefathers in the Faith, we shall be jolted out of centuries of compromise and brought face to face with the gospel in all its naked glory.

Homework:

Watch the film *Celtic Pilgrimage*. Write a report.

Optional content for further study: *How the Celts saved Britain*, British documentary by secular filmmaker Dan Snow, available on Youtube.

2

THE DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS: A DIVINE SET UP

Unpacking the backdrop of Celtic History

In church history, we see that the Apostles did things slightly differently: for instance, John urged his disciples to follow the Hebrew calendar for the date of Easter, based on a lunar calendar, while the church at Rome followed their own solar calendar date. This goes back to an old church dispute in the 2nd century church, and it lasted through the 7th century, eventually greatly impacting the Celtic church.

Understanding this backdrop of history is important because:

-St. Patrick did not just “show up” and change the world- he brought the carryover of a movement that was already happening in Europe, Western Asia, and Africa that had to do with the Apostle John.

-Great moves of God start with great moves of prayer-

The Celtic church built on two “streams” of Christianity that were already very active in the church: The Desert movement in Egypt, and the Disciples of John.

The Apostle John’s Stream:

Author Ray Simpson in [Exploring Celtic Spirituality](#) says:

The only New Testament letters penned in the name of Christ are those the risen Son of God gave to

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John, when he was in exile on Patmos. The relationship between John and Jesus was the most intimate and free-flowing of Jesus' relationship with the apostles. The Celtic Church, while it accepted the authority of Peter and of all the other apostles, had a special rapport with John, whom it looked upon as its spiritual father.

Characteristics of the disciples of John:

- The 7th century historian Bede tells us that Celtic students of John's Gospel avoided profound arguments and chose to adhere to "faith that works by love." They looked for ways to practically live this out.
- Deep intimacy with Christ
- Relational, with passion for discipleship and mentoring.
- Church leaders were earthy, washing the feet of strangers and pilgrims. Not a hierarchy of leadership.
- They kept the Hebrew date of Easter- this fact is very well documented by the historian Bede.
- According to the writings of his disciples, John taught his followers to embrace certain Hebrew traditions. Many say that Sabbath and other Jewish feasts were celebrated.

-Polycarp- a direct disciple of John. He wrote many letters and contended for the date of Easter as early as 120 AD.

-Ireneus, disciple of Polycarp, planted a church in Gall, modern France. Part of a debate for the date of Easter distinguished the Eastern and Western Church. The Eastern church kept Jewish roots- the Roman church did not.

Rome vs. John:

-Relational leadership vs. governmental- John's disciples fostered deep kinship and relationship with mentors. Rome had a governmental system that elected their popes. There was MUCH POWER at stake.

-The book Electing Popes: Approval Balloting and Qualified-Majority Rule says: *most popes from the fourth to twelfth century were appointed or confirmed by a secular power.*

There was no separation between church and state. During the second century, a disagreement started about the date of Easter- whether it should be celebrated on the Hebrew calendar, or the Roman. Lunar vs. Solar calendar. Polycarp stated he got his tradition straight from John the Apostle, and stuck to the Jewish date. In 195, Pope Victor I even started excommunicating people for this belief, but eventually he backed down when admonished by other church leaders.

The Desert Stream:

The context for the Celtic church begins, not in Ireland, but in Egypt. We know this because:

- Bangor Abby's antiphony dub themselves "a vine transplanted from Egypt."
- The main Celtic cross at Clonmacnoise in Ireland, dating back to the age of the Celtic church, has St. Anthony depicted at the top.
- There are many references to the desert movement within Celtic traditions.

Anthony the Great: Father of the Desert Movement

Anthony lived in Egypt 251-356 AD, and he pioneered the movement of prayer and intimacy with God

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in the desert.

-At the age of about 18 years old, his parents died and he was left with a large sum of money. On the way to church one day, he was pondering how the apostles gave everything away to follow the Lord, and when he entered the church, the Scripture was read from the minister about the rich young ruler. He was so moved, that he gave everything away to the poor and entered the desert to pray.

His biographer, Saint Athanasius, says,

For there was not yet in Egypt this continuous chain of monastic cells, nor did any monk know the far desert, but each person who wished to take heed to himself practiced asceticism alone not far from his own village.

Webster's defines *Ascetic*: *practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline*

-Desert fathers and mothers lived in the wilderness after the pattern of Jesus, who fasted and prayed for 40 days and did battle with the devil, emerging with God's anointing and power.

Author Laura Swan says in, The Forgotten Desert Mothers:

Prayer was a continuous way of life in the desert. It was intentionally cultivated until it became second nature. Prayer involved the hard work of learning a new language – the language of heaven. For the ascetic, prayer was not merely the speaking of words. It was the Holy Spirit breathing through the inner spirit of the ascetic and returning to God with yearnings for intimacy. The ascetic sought to cultivate a silent, passionate, and burning love for God experienced in deep and nurturing solitude. The atmosphere for rich prayer was a simple quiet voice, not a noisy inner crowd. Physical as well as inner stillness and quiet were necessary. The words of prayer were brief and straight from the heart. Praying the psalms, intercession, contemplation, and silent awareness of God's presence were all expressions of prayer in the desert and monastery...

Desert ascetics cultivated a heart engaged in intense listening. Listening for the Beloved's voice cultivated a wise and compassionate heart, able to yield to the movements of the Holy Spirit... True discernment does not presuppose how the Spirit will move, nor what God will say.

St. Anthony set a precedence for this way of life, spending nearly two decades in wilderness seclusion.

His biographer writes:

For nearly twenty years he continued to lead the ascetic life by himself in this manner, never going out and seldom seen by anyone. After this, when many had the longing and the will to emulate his asceticism, some of his acquaintances came and broke down the door, wrenching it off by force...

Now for the first time, he was seen outside the fort by those who had come to him. When they beheld him, they marveled to see that his body was in the same condition as before: he was neither fat from lack of exercise, nor withered from fasting and fighting with demons, but just as they had known him before his seclusion. Moreover his soul was in a state of purity...

Through him the Lord healed many of those present who were suffering from bodily ills, and cleansed others of evil spirits. He gave Anthony grace in speaking, and thus he comforted many who were sorrowful...

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And so henceforth, monastic cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was made a city by monks who had left their homes and enrolled themselves for citizenship in the heavens.

The movement began to spread.

During this time, the Roman Emperor Maximus persecuted the church, and there were many martyrs. Anthony had seen so much of heaven by then, that he was unafraid to die. He followed those sentenced to die for their faith, encouraging them so much that one judge banished him and the monks from the judgment hall and the city. But Anthony ignored this. His biographer said,

All the others thought it good to go into hiding that day, but Anthony had so little regard for the judge's order that he washed his outer garment and the next day stood on a high place in front, where the prefect could see him clearly. Everyone marveled at this ... for as I said before, he was praying that he, too, would be a martyr. He therefore seemed grieved because he had not been martyred, but the Lord was keeping him for our benefit and the benefit of others, so that he might be a teacher to many of the asceticism that he had learned from the Scriptures. For many, merely upon seeing his conduct, were eager to become imitators of his way of life.

When the persecution ceased, Anthony returned to the wilderness. He spent his last years visiting and counseling other monastic communities in the desert. From him, the desert father and mother movement began.

-In 312 AD, the Roman Emperor Maximus was defeated by a man named Constantine, who legalized Christianity. Suddenly Christian faith became mixed with the politics of Rome.

-Special favors were given to Christians, and their faith became watered down.

-Many fled to the desert to regain a pure way of thinking. And some moved to the desert in protest.

Celtic author Ray Simpson says in his book, Soul Friendship:

In 313 the Roman emperor made Christianity a favored religion. Whereas in earlier centuries to be a Christian was a sacrifice, now it was a social advantage. Christians became attached to comfort, buildings, status and the trappings of power. Often their faith became secondhand, their morals became lax and their clergy became career-minded.

Christopher Donaldson, Martin of Tours: the Shaping of Celtic Spirituality writes:

Many Christians were sickened by what happened in the fifty or so years of the peace of the church; what had started out as such a glorious triumph full of promise had gone sour, and the church was in danger of becoming a parody of Christianity. The quality that was lacking, was that [which was] provided by the constant threat of persecution, which implied all the time that being a Christian could at any moment mean deprivation of personal goods, job, reputation, and could even mean the death penalty... for three centuries, the test had been martyrdom.

-The Desert movement was a Divine set up: a prayer movement birthed to preserve a stream of pure faith.

-Anthony died in 356 AD. Within 1-5 years of his death, an account was written of his life that became a "best selling book" among Europe, inspiring many to this life. The book was, The Life of Saint

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Anthony by Saint Athanasius, and many copies were spread throughout the known world. There was a hunger for purity, and his story inspired many to live the same way he did.

Ray Simpson in Exploring Celtic Spirituality:

The earliest evangelistic move, after the departing troops of the Roman Empire left fifth-century Britain prey to plunder and chaos, came through Christians inspired by Anthony and the holy men and women of the Egyptian deserts. It was said of Anthony that when he died he left only two things behind: his cloak and a desert full of monks.

Within 50 years of his death, it was written by Saint John Chrysostom:

If you go to the desert of Egypt, you will see that this desert has become better than any paradise; you will see countless choirs of angels in human form, companies of martyrs, and assemblies of virgins, and all the devil's tyranny put down, while Christ's kingdom shines forth...

-It was a radical movement with both men and women, sometimes of very prosperous families, who followed Anthony's lead and left all to live a life of prayer.

-Not only did they pray, but they had incredible wisdom to pass to others.

-These were the Abbots and Ammas, the fathers and mothers of the desert.

-The movement spread through Syria, Jerusalem, and other desert regions.

Michael Mitton: Restoring the Woven Cord:

The ascetic life, lived out in some remote and, frankly, fairly hostile places encouraged a sense of doing battle in the wilderness, following the example of the Lord, but the close proximity to the forces of nature also had the effects of quickening the spirit in prayer.

Zoom conversation with Andy Raine of the Northumbria Community on Lindisfarne, Holy Island.

Desert Mothers and their impact

-Many women went to the deserts, possibly even more women than men. Many were educated, fluent in Scripture and other literature. The biographer of Amma Melania says that she:

"wrote elegantly and flawlessly in little notebooks. She mentally decided how much she should write each day, how much scripture she should read, and how much in the collections of homilies. After she had her fill of these, she went through the lives of the Fathers as if she were eating cake."

Hold this in contrast to the self-serving, political movement that was emerging from the Roman church, and you see why an extreme life of prayer could be compelling.

Why is this important?

-It shows us that the roots of the Celtic church was not birthed by Rome, but by a movement born of prayer, fasting, and personal intimacy with God.

Martin Palmer: Living Christianity

In many parts of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland you can find tiny chapels of the remains of hermitages in

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the most remote and desolate paces. Quite often these places will bear names such as Dysart, Dissarth, or the like. These words are all corruptions of the word desert. And they were so called because in the Celtic monastic tradition, to go to a remote place for spiritual retreat was to go into the desert. The idea of going into the desert is a direct link back to the Coptic monks.

- This desert movement was also rooted in supernatural experiences, angelic visitations, spiritual warfare, and wisdom that came from prayer and Scriptural meditation.
- We see all of these practices as “core” to the Celtic church.
- A move of God is always birthed by prayer-*
- Both men and women were part of this movement.
- God used ordinary people with great passion.
- Supernatural signs were documented.
- Prayer and simplicity were at the heart off this movement.

Homework:

Watch the film, *Thin Places*. Write a report.

3

SAINT PATRICK CALLED TO FATHER A NATION

To discover the truth about Saint Patrick, we must sift through many layers of legends and myths.

Myths say that Patrick:

- Used the shamrock to describe Trinity
- Drove the snakes out of Ireland
- Was Catholic
- Was Irish

Facts:

- We have two writings from Patrick himself, his “Confession” of faith, and a letter to Coronicus, a British warrior.
- In the Bangor Antiphonary, a 6th century document from a monastic center, a psalm lauds him as a leader and father of Celtic church.
- From these documents, we learn many facts about Patrick’s life.

To set the stage for the coming of Patrick to Ireland, we first take a look at how the Desert Movement in Egypt spread into western Europe. Let’s talk about two important people who you will very often hear about in Celtic church history, known as men who were forerunners in the Celtic faith.

Martin of Tours

- Roman soldier in Gall (France).
- Has a vision of Christ, gives everything to God.
- Hears of St. Anthony and sets out to imitate his life.

Christopher Donaldson, Martin of Tours: the Shaping of Celtic Spirituality:

The book, however, that really shook Christendom was the life of Anthony the Great, written by Athanasius, and published while Martin was at Milan in 357 AD...

It was in the spirit of Saint Anthony and fired by his example that Martin and his presbyter colleague stepped ashore on Gallinaria [a small island in northern Italy], their imaginations stirred by the thought of Anthony's hermitage on the mountainside by the shores of the Red Sea.

What Martin had not bargained for was that – while a gushing spring, a few dates, and a handful of wheat grains may be all very well to sustain a quiet life in the Egyptian desert, on the northern shores of the Mediterranean it is much colder and bodily needs become that much more demanding. For two years Martin lived on roots and became so physically exhausted that when his friend called round to tell him that his [spiritual mentor] Hilary had been freed from exile, he found him barely recovered from a nearly fatal dose of the root of a plant... the Christmas Rose – a cure for worms which, as an old, eighteenth-century physician wrote: 'where it killeth not the patient; it would certainly kill the worms.'

He discovered that living in community was much more suitable for northern climates! He left the wilderness, and tracked down his mentor, a man named Hilary. With his help, Martin started a community in Western France in the ruins of a country villa that had been sacked by an army and never restored. The monastic community devoted themselves to prayer.

Some of the things that happened there were:

- Supernatural signs. Someone was raised from the dead.
- Continued long hours in prayer. Visited by angels.
- Martin also lived in an area deeply influenced by the teachings of John. Third generation mentees of the Apostle John had planted a church in Gall.
- Martin created a kind of community that embraced the Desert Father's way of life, but was also **missional**. They trained and sent out missionaries to start other communities.
- Up until now, the fathers and mothers had mostly ministered to people who came to them. Now, they began to train and send out.
- Eventually Martin was made bishop of Tours.

The importance of Martin of Tours:

- Just as happened for St. Anthony, a biographer wrote a story of Martin's life during or shortly after his life, and there is evidence that the book was widely read and followed among the early Celtic believers. We know this because:
- There's a Celtic cross on the island of Iona in remembrance of St. Martin.
- Traditions states that Columba traveled to Tours and brought a gospel that laid on Martin's chest and

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brought it to his own Irish monastery.

-Martin is thought to be related to Patrick's mother, possibly his cousin.

-Martin's monastic community is thought to be a place where Patrick could have studied, because his personal writings mention how he "longed to see his brothers in Gall."

Ninian, another forerunner of Celtic saints

One of those missionaries who studied at Tours was St. Ninian, he studied under Martin, and then planted communities in Scotland and Northern England. The historian Bede tells us that Ninian's regional territory was named after St. Martin of Tours, and he planted a community at Whitehorn. Ninian did not have a biographer, so we know less about him, but he was one of the foremost Celtic missionaries of his time.

These two men are important because of their effect on the Celtic church. It was the missional aspect of their ministry, combined with the monastic teachings of the desert fathers, that began to penetrate Ireland. It is believed that either Martin or Ninian's community provided a spiritual education for 20 years to a young man who was called by God- a man named Patrick.

Video of St. Patrick, narrated by minister and Author Kevin Sambrook in Belfast.

Unpacking Patrick

In Ireland, no separation of church and state exists, as we know it in America today: Protestants and Catholics are political parties, not just religious denominations.

-To see this, look at the late 1960's to late 1990's when we see *The Troubles*.

Wikipedia says: *despite the use of the terms Protestant and Catholic to refer to the two sides, it was not a religious conflict... Unionists, who were mostly Ulster Protestants, wanted Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom. Irish nationalists, who were mostly Irish Catholics, wanted Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join a united Ireland.*

-Today, Northern Ireland is predominately Protestant, Republic of Ireland is Catholic.

Zoom video with Pastor Jack McKee.

-Today, the North does not celebrate St. Patrick's Day, but the South celebrates all the saints.

-However, if you truly study history, you will see that Patrick has no known connection to the church of Rome.

-Difficulty arose when the Celtic church refused to bow to the church at Rome and the Catholics did the same thing the Roman empire did-- rewrote their history to include their own influence. They hired hagiographers to write the life of Patrick with ties to their church. These stories were written hundreds of years after Patrick's life, and can not be substantiated with any real evidence.

-However, we do have writings of St. Patrick himself, and his early works. His *Confession* is the first known written document in Ireland. There are ZERO references to the Catholic/Roman church.

-We can tell from *Confessions*, and references to Patrick in the Bangor Antiphony that he was one of the Irish church fathers, grounded in the Word of God, a man of prayer, and walked in supernatural miracles like the raising of the dead. One scholar has counted 340 quotations from 46 books of Bible within Patrick's writings alone! For instance:

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But if it had been granted to me as to others, I would not, however, be silent, because of the recompense. And if, perhaps, it appears to some that I put myself forward in this matter with my ignorance and slower tongue, it is however, written: 'Stammering tongues shall learn quickly to speak peace.' Isaiah 32: 4 How much more ought we to aim at this – who are the 'epistle of Christ' – for salvation to the end of the earth (Acts 13:47) – and if not eloquent, yet powerful and very strong – written in your hearts 'not with ink,' it is testified... 'but by the Spirit of the living God.' (2 Cor 3:3)

-Jewish roots: it is quite possible that he was Jewish, or at least that there was a great reverence for the Jewish people within his writings. There are credible authors who have written books on this topic.

Zoom video with Pastor Kevin of Belfast.

Homework: book to read: Chosen: The Footsteps of St. Patrick, by Kevin Sambrook

For students with class credit, write a report on this book.

4

THIN PLACES COMMUNITY THAT CHANGED CULTURE

St. Patrick brought the gospel to Ireland, and his followers set up monastic communities. One evidence that Patrick was connected to the movement of the Desert Fathers is that a monastic movement sprang up among his followers in Ireland that looked just like the monastic communities that sprang from the desert movement. They used lots of creativity, and those communities could be either small or large, with a variety of leadership styles.

Ian Bradley, Colonies of Heaven:

As used in the British Isles in the centuries between the departure of the Romans and coming of the Normans, the word monasterium covered a huge range of different communities, from tiny settlements of two or three hermit's huts to townships comprising several thousand people. Monasteries could be made up entirely of hermits, of anchorites, of those living a cenobitic or communal life of a mixture of both solitaries and monks living in community. They could be single-sex institutions or communities of both sexes, some of whose members led celibate lives and others of whom were married.

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In historical context, this was an era following great persecution of the church. Martyrs were highly honored by the Celtic church, even though Ireland did not have any. This bothered the Irish, because they feared they were being left out of heaven's highest honors! So they created their own types of martyrdom which was a kind of "death for Christ's sake."

Three types of martyrs

- Red martyrs: shed their blood for Christ.
- White martyrs: missionaries sailed off into the white sky, leaving behind family and homeland.
- Green martyrs: gave their lives to intimacy and prayer.

The term "Thin Places" was first attributed to Celtic monks. What started as a "green martyrdom" movement of intimacy and prayer, attracted crowds of seekers. They built communities around the Thin Place, and these became the first monasteries.

- The Irish took the Desert Fathers way of life and added hospitality, community, the copying of scripture, arts, and education. Their monasteries became the universities of their times, and even kings sent their children to be educated.
- A monastic movement: it could include families, married or single people, it modeled Christianity to the culture.
- This intense discipleship produced many leaders.
- Independently governed: unlike the Roman church, they had their own bishops and elders who were mentored by other heroes of the faith and started their own communities.
- When the numbers got too big, a leader would take 12 disciples and go start a new community.

Attributes of Celtic Communities:

Places of Prayer

Sometimes a leader was given land to start a holy place, and they immediately started to fast and pray, consecrating the land to God. As on the island of Lindisfarne, they fasted and prayed on the land for 40 days, then built a chapel, then prayer cells, then houses.

Michael Mitton: Restoring the Woven Cord:

Early on, Aidan set up a pattern of prayer and worship on Lindisfarne that became an easy-to-follow example for all. They clearly saw themselves as having an intercessory responsibility for the nation. After a victory against the ever-threatening Penda, King Oswy gave twelve grants of land where, as expressed by Bede, 'heavenly warfare was to take the place of earthly.' This land became the home of a monastic community whose job it was to make constant intercession for the peace of the nation. To turn a battle site into a place of prayer was typical of the Celtic desire to heal the land, turning darkness to light.

Finding a "Desert"

Bede's Ecclesiastical history tells us of Cedd, a Celtic monk who was asked by the son of King Oswald to start a monastery. We would have looked for some place with easy access, but he looked for the

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darkest, most difficult place possible.

Cedd chose a site for the monastery among some high and remote hills, which seemed more suitable for the dens of robbers and haunts of wild beasts than for human habitation. His purpose in this was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, 'in the habitations of dragons where each lay, shall be grass, with reeds and rushes,' so that the fruits of good works might spring up where formerly lived only wild beasts, or men who lived like wild beasts.

But the man of God, desiring first to cleanse the place which he had received for the monastery from stain of former crimes, by prayer and fasting, and so to lay the foundations there, requested of the king that he would give him opportunity and leave to abide there for prayer all the time of Lent, which was at hand. All which days, except Sundays, he prolonged his fast till the evening, according to custom, and then took no other sustenance than a small piece of bread, one hen's egg, and a little milk and water. This, he said, was the custom of those of whom he had learned the rule of regular discipline, first to consecrate to the Lord, by prayer and fasting, the places which they had newly received for building a monastery or a church.

Places of Spiritual Warfare

Cuthbert, Aidan's successor, followed the pattern of the desert fathers by finding a space in the wilderness to pray and turning it into a sanctuary. ,

Not till he first gained victory over our invisible enemy by solitary prayer and fasting did he take it on himself to seek out a remote battlefield farther away from his fellow man. The Farne lies a few miles to the south-east of Lindisfarne, cut off on the landward side by very deep water and facing, on the other side, out towards the limitless ocean. The island was haunted by devils; Cuthbert was the first man brave enough to live there alone. At the entry of our soldier of Christ armed with 'the helmet of salvation,' the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God,' the devil fled and his host of allies with him.

We do not know what made the island such a terrible place to the church. Perhaps it was a place of pagan worship, or perhaps it was simply lonely and wild. However, Cuthbert cleansed and turned it into a holy site with his prayers.

Intense Lifestyles:

The twelfth century biographer of David of Wales described his life in monastery:

After work in the fields, there was study before they chanted psalms in church and knelt in vigil until twilight. After a simple meal and three more hours of prayer, they slept until cockcrow. They had all things in common, not one should even say 'this is my book.' Their clothing was basic, mainly skins. David upheld St. Paul's rule: 'If a person will not work, he will not eat.'

Although the brothers had only one proper meal each day, they prepared appetizing meals for the sick and aged guests. The 10th century Laws of Howell make clear that the monasteries were more of a fellowship than a hierarchy. Though the abbot had particular responsibilities, gifts of money had to be shared equally between them all. The large monasteries were divided into households each of which

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had one priest.

Deep roots in Scripture:

Pagan Ireland was not a literate culture. Ogham writing was part of their culture, but storytelling was far more popular than written works. Funny enough, the Irish not only learned Latin in a few generations, but they kept literacy alive in Europe during the Dark Ages!

Thomas Cahill: How the Irish saved Civilization

The Irish received literacy in their own way, as something to play with. The only alphabet they'd ever known was prehistoric Ogham, a cumbersome set of lines based on the Roman alphabet, which they incised laboriously into the corners of standing stones to turn them into memorials. These rune-like inscriptions, which continued to appear in the early years of the Christian period, hardly suggested what would happen next, for within a generation the Irish had mastered Latin and even Greek and, as best they could, were picking up some Hebrew.

Not only did they write the scriptures, but they memorized them with a passion.

Ian Bradley: Colonies of heaven

*In this respect, as in so many others, Celtic monastic practice followed that of the Egyptian desert communities, some of whose members are described as continually chanting the Psalms. There are echoes of this practice in the depiction of Columba in the twelfth-century Irish *Liuthair* rattling through all 150 Psalms (the three fifties) before sunrise every morning as he lay on the beach on Iona after sleeping for just a few hours on the bare earth floor of his cell with a stone for his pillow.*

Poem by St. Columba, who called the 150 Psalms “the three fifties:”

*The three fifties, a heavy burden
throughout the night, great was the pain,
in the sea alongside Scotland,
before the sun would rise.*

Copied Scriptures:

The larger communities had a *Scriptorium*, which means: *a place for writing*. The Celts were highly creative, and this showed up in how they copied the Scriptures. Some of their linguistic traits have carried over into our language today.

- They created spaces between words; previously all words in Latin ran together.
- Also punctuation marks and capital letters
- Creativity in penmanship and headings.
- Illuminated manuscripts, like the Book of Kells. We will talk more about this later.

Scribes sometimes added funny margin notes to their texts:

"Thank God, it will soon be dark,"

"New parchment; bad ink- I say nothing more."

"Writing is excessive drudgery. It crooks your back, it dims your sight, it twists your stomach and your

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sides."

"Let the reader's voice honor the writer's pen."

"As a harbor is welcome to a sailor, so the last line is welcome to a scribe."

"While I wrote, I froze, and what I could not write by the beams of the sun, I finished by candlelight."

"Oh, my hand."

Hospitality:

Ian Bradley: Colonies of Heaven

One of the most costly and demanding tasks undertaken by the monasteries in early medieval Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales was the exercise of a constant ministry of hospitality. Often the guest-house or "hospitium" was given the choicest site within the monastic settlement and its residents were regularly given the best food and drink. The lives of both Celts and Anglo-Saxon saints are filled with stories illustrating their concern to make visitors welcome.

Columba supposedly wrote two of the hymns that are commonly attributed to him while grinding oats to make bread for guests expected on Iona. The monastery which he founded at Derry is said to have provided meals for a thousand hungry people each day. The early Irish life of Brigid speaks of her continually breaking bread and making butter for those visiting the mixed monastery over which she presided at Kildare. Tradition has it that when churning butter she always made thirteen portions: twelve in the honor of apostles and an extra one in honor of Christ, which was reserved for guests and the poor. The monks at David's monastery in Pembrokeshire fed off bread and water but cooked sumptuous meals for their guests. Bede tells of how Cuthbert, serving as guest-master of a new monastery at Ripon in the depths of winter, found a young man sitting in the guest-house. He 'got water to wash his hands, washed his feet himself, dried them, put them in his bosom and humbly chafed them with his hands.' Later Cuthbert cooked a meal for the youth only to find that he had gone, although there were no footprints in the snow. Returning to the kitchen he found three newly made and apparently miraculous loaves lying on the table. He was convinced that God had sent an angel to encourage the ministry of hospitality in the newly founded monastery.

Video: Barbara McNiece on Highland Hospitality

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5

IRISH FATHERS

UNEXPECTED LEADERS WHO BUILT THE CELTIC CHURCH

In this session we will study four examples of Celtic communities and their leaders, starting with the earliest (St. Kevin was born within 40 years of Patrick's death), and moving forward in history. We will see the evolution of the Celtic Church: how it started with teachings of the Desert Fathers and Apostle John, building momentum by adding its own creative attributes, and became a movement in its own rite. Each of these locations have ruins, museums, or communities that a pilgrim can visit today in Ireland, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland.

We will look at:

- Glendalough- St. Kevin
- Bangor- St. Comgall
- Iona- St. Columba

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-Lindisfarne- Aidan

Glendalough and St. Kevin

-Kevin was born in 497 AD

-Glendalough is in the Republic of Ireland, outside of Dublin. St. Kevin has very strong love for solitude, but also consented to start a community. Ray Hughes shares how this community was known for its hospitality.

Video: Glendalough

Bangor Abby and St. Comgall:

-Comgall lived 516-602 AD

-Bangor was a community of at least 2,000 people, they are most known for their practice of 24/7 worship, prayer that lasted 150-300 years in the Dark Ages. It was called the "Light of the world" because the community trained and sent out so many missionaries.

This community dates back to the life of St. Patrick, who had a vision of worshiping angels in this valley, a foretelling of what was to come after his lifetime.

Ian Adamson: [Bangor: Light of the World:](#)

It was said that when St. Patrick and his companions came one day to a certain valley in the north of County Down, suddenly "they beheld the valley filled with a heavenly light and with a multitude of the host of heaven they heard, as chanted forth from the voice of angels, the psalmody of a celestial choir." This place so enthralled those holy men that they called it the Valley of the Angels.

In the process of time there was built in this valley a holy place called Bangor, in which was celebrated a praise to God such as the world had seldom seen or heard. Such was the veneration in which it was held that St Bernard wrote of it in the twelfth century: A place it was, truly sacred, the nursery of saints who brought forth fruit most abundantly to the Glory of God... one of the sons of that holy congregation... is alone reputed to have been the founder of a hundred monasteries.

Video: Bangor

Iona and St. Columba

-Columba lived 521- 597 AD

-He was one of Ireland's three patron saints after Patrick and Brigit of Kildare, and one of the twelve apostles of Ireland.

-By the mid-fifth century, Ireland was saturated with Christianity, and the coasts of Scotland by Ninian. Inner tribes of Picts were more untouched.

-God chose the most unlikely of people to do his work as a missionary to these tribes.

Video: Columba's Story

-Iona became a governmental hub: a meeting ground for apostles and prophets.

-This community was the epitome of Celtic Christianity culture: a remote island, a place where Druids

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lived that was cleansed and became a thriving university.

-Accessible to both Ireland and Scotland by water.

-Kings sent their children there to be schooled by monks.

-Archaeologists have discovered metal works on Iona, telling us that it was the home of craftsmen.

-The Book of Kells was probably created here and later moved for safety.

Biggest historical source: a biography written about 100 years after Columba's death by Saint Adamnan, an Irish monk who was directly related to Columba, had studied under Columba's Irish monastery, and later became the 9th abbot of Iona.

Wikipedia says: *Adamnan was the author of the book on the life of his cousin, Columba, the Vita, probably written between 697 and 700. The biography is by far the most important surviving work written in early medieval Scotland, and is a vital source for our knowledge of the Picts, and an insight into the life of Iona and the early medieval Gaelic monk.*

This biography describes deep spiritual experiences:

He merited also frequently to enjoy the delightful, most sweet, and luminous visits of holy angels... often did he see the souls of certain righteous men borne by angels to the highest heavens, and the Holy Spirit unveiling it to him. But also he many a time beheld other souls of evil men borne by demons to the infernal regions.

-Many prophetic revelations. Before phones and social media, Columba would often know when people were coming to meet him and why.

-First mention of Loch Ness Monster.

Columba also wrote lovely poems:

Delightful to me to be on an island hill, on the crest of a rock,

that I might often watch the quiet sea;

That I might watch the heavy waves above the bright water,

as they chant music to their Father everlastingly.

The Venerable Bede tells us: *We know for certain that Columba left successors distinguished for their purity of life, their love of God, and their loyalty to the rules of the monastic life.*

Celtic communities were not static: one birthed another. From Iona, we see another monastic community emerge that shaped history in big ways.

Lindisfarne and St. Aidan

Lived 590-651 (approx DOB)

Lindisfarne, Holy Island is a major pilgrim site in Northumbria, Northern England.

This community was birthed by Iona, and started by an Irish missionary.

Video- Aidan's story.

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Cuthbert, became leader after Aiden at Lindisfarne, and there are many written records of his life there as well.

What does it look like to keep Celtic community today?

Video: Andy Raine: Community on Lindesfarne

6

CELTIC MOTHERS WOMEN, ARTS, AND PROSPERITY

Just as the desert movement was made up of both the “Abbas and Ammas,” or fathers and mothers, the Celtic church had many influential women as well as men. They offer us a fascinating look at church leadership and the Celtic communities’ way of life. Unlike the desert mothers who needed to disguise themselves to live for God, these women thrived in a culture that was more accepting of women. They raised up bishops, led co-ed communities, and kings sought their wisdom and sent their royal children to be fostered by their care.

This is important to understand, because Celtic women are often misrepresented. History tells us that there were many godly women in the Celtic church, and they can provide inspiration for us today.

- The most famous Celtic women are Brigid and Hilda
- Brigid is considered one of the patron saints of Ireland, but there is not a lot of historical documentation on her life.
- Hilda is very well documented. The historian Bede lived during her lifetime and he gives us lots of written accounts.
- There were also lesser known women, like Non, Elfleda and Ita who was the soul friend (or spiritual mentor) of St. Brendan.
- Ireland was more like our western culture today, so unlike the Desert Mothers who had to disguise themselves for safety, Irish women were much freer to pursue their calling.
- Desert mother story: Amma Euphrosyne of Alexandria, 410 AD. In our cultural context, this would be highly unhealthy! But passion for Christ was the primary motive and cultivating a life of prayer was placed above everything else. Irish women had more freedom, so we see them thriving far more in the

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Celtic church.

Website: celtic-christianity.co.uk:

It would appear that, compared to other women in the ancient world, Celtic women were able to function within their society on a much more equal footing with men.

-The Irish Brehon law gave more rights and protection to women than any other western law code at that time or until recent times. Women had political equality, and could even lead the tribe. They could ascribe to any office or profession open to men. They had equal rights to divorce and to a share of property in such matters. They were able to own and inherit property .

-Greek women, on the other hand, had no political rights, were subject to arranged marriages and had no right of inheritance.

-Roman women became a possession of the husband at marriage, could not own anything and had few political rights.

However, this was still a culture of war. Many atrocities were part of the customs, and women and children were put in harms way. In Scottish tribes, a woman could be tortured by her husband if she refused to go to war, and even forced to take her nursing baby with her. The Celtic church rose up to defend the innocent lives, and St. Adomnan even shifted the culture for good in this way.

Video: St. Adomnan

-Not only did the Celtic believers defend innocent women and children, but they also embraced spiritual equality in the Celtic church, according to Paul's writings: in Christ, there is no male or female.

-We see that the Apostle John ordained women as leaders within the church, and that his book of 2nd John written to a woman in leadership, warning her not to allow false teachers in the church.

-Celts adhered to the teachings of John

-These women were deeply devoted to Christ, full of wisdom and the Spirit, and diligent leaders.

-Most documented example was Hilda, leader of a co-ed monastery. Of Hilda, Bede writes, "All who knew her called her mother because of her outstanding devotion and grace".

Video: Hilda

These women were not just "sitting around," they were actively involved with the practical work of running these self-sustained communities. They led others into leadership, saw the gifts in them, and raised them up.

Hilda discovered Caedmon – England's first poet, the first worship leader that we know of in New Testament church.

Video: Caedmon

Celtic Arts

These Celtic communities became places where the arts flourished. Archaeological finds "have begun to show that insular early medieval monasteries were major production and distribution centers of religious metalwork."¹

1 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00766097.2019.1672301>

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Ian Bradley: Colonies of Heaven:

The Celts had a very strong sense of the almost physical power of the spoken word both to heal and to harm. The Irish fili (poet) was thought to have two compartments in his tongue, one for honey, and the other for poison.

George G. Hunter III, The Celtic Way of Evangelism:

The Irish and other Celtic peoples were predominately right-brained, and in reaching them, Celtic Christianity adapted remarkably from its earlier Roman reliance upon words, propositions, concepts, and theological abstractions.

Ian Bradley in The Celtic Way says that Celtic leaders:

excelled at expressing their faith in symbols, metaphors and images, both visual and poetic. They had the ability to... paint pictures in words, signs and music that acted as icons opening windows on heaven and pathways to eternity... they have much to teach Christians today seeking to rekindle their imaginative faculties.

Arts include: the Book of Kells, Book of Darrow, and the Durham Gospels. The Lindesfarne gospels actually had jewels embedded in its pages. Works of stone, like St. Martin's Cross on Iona, started appearing in the 8th century.

A book that documents prayers and Highland rhymes is the 19th century, Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations. While not strictly written from a Christian perspective, its 600+ pages can clue us into the passion the Celts carry for song and verse. Other books are good for prayer, like God in our Midst by Martin Reith, which carries a compelling collection of Highland verses that are more Christian in prayer.

Alexander Carmichael, Carmina Galelica:

Perhaps no people had a fuller ritual of song and story, of secular rite and religious ceremony, than the Highlanders. Mirth and music, song and dance, tale and poem, pervaded their lives, as electricity pervades the air.

Video: Linette Penney Gainham

The Celtic communities became influential and wealthy. Their earthly treasures began to attract the attention of another people group: the Vikings.

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7

PRACTICES OF THE CELTIC SAINTS

In this session we'll discuss some of the most powerful and endearing practices of the Celtic Saints. Each of these is able to inspire our faith journey with new tools for growth.

Pilgrimage

Webster's Dictionary defines the word: *a journey to a holy place*

Ian Bradley, Colonies of Heaven:

After ten years of exploring Celtic Christianity in all sorts of moods – with the enthusiasm of a convert, the skepticism of the scholar, the faith of the believer, the misty eyes of the romantic and the hard-headed detachment of the academic – I remain convinced of one thing: that pilgrimage is its single most important and distinctive theme.

... The lives of the saints and other early sources are full of accounts of the constant criss-crossing of sea ways and overland routes by monks going on preaching and pastoral tours or setting out to found monastic communities and plant new colonies of heaven...

... In symbolic terms, pilgrimage was a favorite metaphor to express the Celtic emphasis on the dynamic character of Christian faith. It is there in the sermons of Columbanus which describe the

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Christian life as a journey and this earth as a way and not a resting place or destination.

- St. Brendan: combined the prayer and fasting movement with missions excursions.
- Also, he paved the way for Columbus' journey to the Americas.

Video of St. Brendan

Michael Mitton, Restoring the Woven Cord:

There is a wildness about the Holy Spirit, who is like the wind that 'blows where it chooses...' Too many churches have wanted to domesticate the Holy Spirit, keeping the wild goose 'safe' by imposing rigid and controlling worship styles on our Sunday worship (whether it be liturgical or 'free'), trapping our meetings with bureaucracy and endless reports, and feeding our people with tragically low expectations of what God can do in and through them... The Celtic Church... joyfully challenges us to learn once again what it means to have a carefree spirit of adventure.

Pilgrim roads in Scotland. "Right to Roam."

Video: Arno and Rolinke Bremer, missionaries to Scotland

Rhythms of Prayer:

- Ninians' circle prayer.
- Celtic prayers include solitude and deep intimacy with the Spirit.
- Prayers for everyday life: milking a cow or putting your clothes on.
- In an illiterate society that did not have Scriptures in the common language, the average person could be taught prayers that they could memorize.

Tracy Balzer, Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity:

Again we see that not only was prayer offered in the most ordinary of moments, but that those ordinary moments were made extraordinary – they were sanctified and made holy by prayer. So it wasn't just that the line between the sacred and secular was blurred, thereby neutralizing everything in a general sort of way. Rather, each action, each event, each task was made to be holy. All things, all tasks could be sanctified in worship to God.

Nature

The Celts believed there were two books given to men by God: Bible and the earth. They loved the earth and felt connected to it, however, didn't worship it as their pagan forebearers worshiped the elements. Instead, they believed Christ controlled the elements and they felt called to redeem the earth. One reason they went into wild places was to redeem the land and restore it to the power of Christ.

Ray Simpson, Exploring Celtic Spirituality:

The Celtic Christians saw Christ as the means of restoring to the created world a communication that had become fragmented. They did not deceive themselves that all was well with the world, or that harmony with it was possible merely 'in the natural.' It was only through their communion with Christ, the Source and the Savior of creation, that communion between themselves and other creatures was fostered. The Logos, from whom emanated the energies that resulted in created things, was the Christ of the cradle, the cross and the crown.

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He argues that the Druid worship of Pantheism highly differed from the Celts' regard for God's creation.

There is a subtle reason why people prefer to think of God as merely a power, or a formless life-force flowing through the universe: there are no demands – one is not challenged to relate to an energy in the same way one is challenged to relate to a person.

C.S. Lewis put it like this: “The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for him, like a book on the shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven or earth should fall awe at his glance. But Christ the Creator King is there. And his intervening presence is terribly startling to discover.”

Celtic Christianity says matter is holy, but matter is no God. We need to relate to every organism, but through Christ. As we do this, he filters out what is destructive in us. This enables communion.

There are many stories of the Celtic saints interacting with nature:

- seals came to warm Cuthbert's feet in the chilly ocean
- a sea creature carried Ronan to his island home
- a bird made its' nest with Kevin
- a horse was sad about Columba's approaching death

There are many more: some may be myth, but the sheer amount of these types of stories reveal the Celts' value for creation and desire for God to redeem it.

Wild Goose

Mary Fleeson, an artist with the Northumbria community on Lindisfarne:

In modern Celtic tradition the Holy Spirit is represented as a bird, but not the peaceful and serene dove landing on Jesus at his baptism.

The Wild Goose tells a different side of the Holy Spirit. To begin with, wild geese aren't controllable, you can't restrain a wild goose and bend it to your will. They're raucous and loud, unlike the sweet and calming cooing of a dove, a goose's call is strong, challenging, strident and unnerving – and just a bit scary.

In much the same way the Spirit of God can be demanding and unsettling and at times even a little scary.

Supernatural Signs and Spiritual Warfare

Many of the stories of Celtic saints include spiritual warfare: struggles with powers of darkness, just as the desert fathers. There are many accounts of the saints coming in direct conflict with the dark powers of the druids and overcoming them with the spirit of Christ.

- St. Patrick's Breastplate is a prayer for protection against the spell of druids
- A local chief hired a druid to put a spell on Senan, but when the druid landed on a nearby island, a tidal wave enveloped him and swept him to his death.
- Columba removed the Druid university before setting up Iona
- A story of St. Senan on Scattery Island tells of a druid who plotted to take his life, but instead found himself endangered.
- Because of Aidan's prayer life, an entire castle was saved.

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Video of Aidan praying for castle.

Ordinary men gave themselves to God and were used in extraordinary ways.

Video: Barbara McNiece on Isle of Aran

Soul Friends

Anamchara: anam: soul, chara: friend.

A friend of the soul.

Edward Sellner, The Celtic Soul Friend: *“to be a soul friend is to provide a cell, a place of sanctuary to another where, through our acceptance, love, and hospitality, he or she can grow in wisdom, and both of us in depth.”*

Tracy Balzer, Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity:

The anamchara was a skilled listener, a pastor, a friend who by his or her very nature and character communicated a sense of safety and trustworthiness.

...The anamchara was one who could recognize the image of God in each person, treating each seeker as he would treat Christ himself, creating a haven where truth could be spoken in love.

St. Anthony and Paul, another desert hermit, had a close spiritual friendship which was depicted on top of Celtic crosses. The Celts found this idea compelling, and they ran with the concept.

Ray Simpson Soul Friendship: Celtic Insights into Spiritual Mentoring:

Early Christian communities in Ireland placed a very high value on soul friendship. The Rule of St. Comgall, founder of the monastery at Bangor, who died in 602, contains these wise words: ‘though you may think you are very solid, it is not good to be your own guide.’ St. Brigid told a young priest in fifth century Ireland that just as the water in a well full of lime was good for nothing, so was a person without a soul friend. ‘Go off and don’t eat until you get a soul friend,’ she said.

Video: Archbishop Russel Mcanahan

8

THE CELTIC DEMISE THE CONQUER AND OPPRESSION OF THE CELTIC CHURCH

As mentioned earlier, the Celtic monasteries flourished and started to become very wealthy. The monastic centers were given gifts of land and wealth by kings. Artisans crafted works of art and scribes created beautiful manuscripts.

- Illuminated manuscripts became more and more opulent
- Kings offered the church large grants of land.
- It became harder for the leaders in Rome to ignore the Celtic church.
- The movement that first started with unknown monks became a source of culture and influence. This started to be a “burr under the saddle of Rome.”
- The Celtic church refused to pay tribute to the Pope, and they kept the date of Easter according to John’s calendar, rather than Rome’s.
- Instead of acknowledging their differences and moving on, Rome began to push for control of the church.

Remember the struggle between Eastern and Western church about the date of Easter in the second century? This debate became much more than a date: it became a power play. Two ways of life were

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in conflict: the way of the church in Rome, and the ways of the followers of the Apostle John. Rome began to press for – not just a change in the date, but a change of lifestyle that required conformity to Roman church authority in all areas.

Magnus Magnusson, Lindisfarne, the Cradle Island:

Celtic monks lived in conspicuous poverty; Roman monks lived well. Celtic monks practiced humility, Roman bishops paraded pomp. Celtic bishops were ministers of their flocks, Roman bishops were monarchs of their vices. Celtic clergymen said, “Do as I do,” and hoped to be followed; Roman clergymen said, “Do as I say,” and expected to be obeyed.

A counsel met at Whitby Abbey, Hilda’s community, to discuss which direction the kingdom of Northumbria would adopt for its citizens. Three issues were at stake:

- The date of Easter
- Giving tithes to the pope
- The monks haircuts.

Ray Simpson, Exploring Celtic Spirituality:

The Celtic mission was successful because the Christians went with the flow of human patterns in as far as they were not intrinsically godless. Thus they use natural networks, but confronted anti-Christian and therefore in a sense unnatural networks such as those of the shamans, who uses spells and invoked occult powers.

Forces converged at Hilda’s monastic community in the most unusual of ways. This struggle came to a head- not in Ireland, but in Northern England- at Whitby.

Video of Whitby

Whitby represented the “beginning of the end” of the Celtic church’s Golden Era. Although many of the Celtic communities continued their way of life for over 150 years, the grip of Rome slowly started making its way across the British Isles.

In the ninth century, the Vikings closed in. Ransacking the monasteries, they killed monks and raided treasures.

Video: Vikings on Iona.

Wikipedia: As the eighth century neared its close, religion and learning still flourished, but unexpected dangers approached and a new enemy came, before whose assaults, monk and monastery and saint and scholar disappeared. These invaders were the Danes from the coasts of Scandinavia. Pagans and pirates, they were formidable foes both on land and sea.

In Ireland as elsewhere they attacked the monasteries and churches, desecrated the altars, carried away the gold and silver vessels and smoking ruins and murdered monks attested to the fury of their assaults. Under native and Christian chiefs’ churches were destroyed, church lands appropriated by laymen, monastic schools deserted and lay abbots ruled at Armagh and elsewhere. Bishops were consecrated without Sees and conferred orders for money, there was chaos in church government and corruption everywhere.

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In a series of synods, at which the pope's legate presided, many salutary enactments were passed, and for the first time diocesan episcopacy was established. However, there was still a remnant of Celtic traditions that continued until the 12th century, when the Pope authorized King Henry the II to destroy the remnants of the Irish church.

In December 1155, a Papal Bull (or, decree) authorizing the Normans to proceed to conquer Ireland "to check the torrent of wickedness, to reform evil manners, to sow the seeds of virtue". It included the condition that a penny should be yearly paid from each house to the See of Rome.

Wikipedia says: ***Laudabiliter** The sealed letter in 1155 purports to grant the right to King Henry II of England to invade and govern Ireland and to enforce the Gregorian Reforms on the semi-autonomous Christian Church in Ireland. Other leaders of the Norman invasion of Ireland (1169–71) claimed that Laudabiliter authorised the invasion.*

Video: Anna

What have we lost?

- Jewish roots were lost, connection to the Apostle John.
- Supernatural signs and wonders ceased to be “common” in the church for hundreds of years.
- Women as leaders in co-ed ministry vanished.
- Relational practices like soul friendship ceased.
- Sacred music in the common tongue stopped.
- Self-governing church systems were lost.
- The church ceased to be the healing center of the community.
- Hospitality was not a central focus.
- Corporate prayer was not the center of the church.
- Personal prayer and intimacy with God were replaced by loyalty to the governing church.
- For the Irish, oppression took the place of prosperity and self-government for hundreds of years.

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TAKEAWAYS LESSONS FOR THE SEEKER AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

In this session we will talk about things we can learn from Celtic spirituality. We will start with looking at practices for **personal growth**, and then we will look at how the Celts offer perspective for **church and community life**.

Personal Growth

Let us talk about spiritual disciplines/practices for growth in our faith.

Rebecca Friedlander: The Divine Adventure: Spiritual Practices for the Modern-day Disciple: *Since the word disciple means “learner,” the term disciplines could be defined as “ways to learn.” These ideas help us practice being a disciple of Jesus in our modern world. Far more than a list of rules or a textbook of prayers, they give us tools to practice discipleship in intentional ways, stirring our passion for Christ and helping us live it out. Like finding a trail of footprints left by Christ and his followers, we can set our feet on the same weathered path and discover The Way they walked...*

Regardless of where your path takes you, spiritual practices lay the groundwork for God's plan, setting you up for success. As we build God's practical truths into our lives, we lay the necessary foundation for his unique plan to come to pass. Like strong layers of brick and mortar, these practices create a deep, sturdy platform to build on, regardless of what your personal structure looks like. The calling of

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God will be uniquely yours, but these basic principles challenge all of us to rise to the high calling of following Christ.

Ask yourself these questions:

-Prayer: what does it look like to create a rhythm of prayer in your life? What are some ways you can bring prayer into your daily life?

-Pilgrimage: is God calling you to take a journey with him? Examples: Ireland, Israel, conference,

-Fasting: what are some steps you can take to cultivate fasting in your life? Breakthrough, answered prayer. Keep it simple.

-Worship: Celtic saints worshiped both privately and in community. How can you cultivate both in your life?

-Soul friend: do you have a spiritual mentor? Go find one! It is up to you to ask. For me: project

based: may have a number of mentors who speak into my life.

Church and Community life:

Ian Bradley: Colonies of heaven

The Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monasteries were centers of liturgical, artistic, pastoral, and scholarly excellence. There is every reason to develop similar centers of excellence now which will serve both as places of creative and high-quality worship and pastoral care to which people will come for inspiration, refreshment and healing, and also as places from which ministerial teams can be equipped and resourced for worship, mission, teaching and pastoral care in other places.

... In our enthusiasm for creating multi-purpose churches, we should not forget that the central function of the Celtic monastery was a house of prayer. So it should be for those buildings which become bases for the new style of monasteria today.

Video with Andy Raine

Celtic Community is not about following a liturgy or praying 6 times a day: it is looking for the need in your community, and following the Holy Spirit to meet that need. It is learning to lean on the chest of the Beloved, as John did.

My journey includes the start of my non-profit, “The Potter’s House Creative Ministries,” where we practice community around the Thin Place of prayer and worship.

Homework: read *The Divine Adventure* and write a report. Consider what practices God may be leading you to for personal and community growth.

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QUESTIONS

Write your questions for the Q&A session. Email them to the leader, and they will be addressed in the last session.
