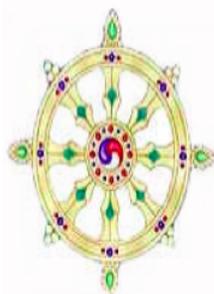


A History of the Celtic Church

Before His Ascension, Jesus commanded His disciples to go to every nation and to preach the good news to all people (Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15). The disciples scattered and took the news of Jesus' death and resurrection throughout the Roman Empire. Eusebius (Bishop of Alexandria, noted historian and theologian who wrote the first comprehensive history of the early church and was present at Council of Nicea) says the apostles traveled to all points of the compass spreading the Good News. Within a short time churches were established in North Africa, Asia Minor and the European continent as reported in Acts. Historians and the Early Church Fathers tell us that the faith was brought to the Brittanic Isles too by Joseph of Arimathea.



Joseph of Arimathea was a tin merchant and we're told in Mat 27:57 that he was wealthy and in John 19:38 a secret follower of Jesus. The Talmud tells us he was Mary's father's youngest brother or Mary's uncle. Even though Joseph of Arimathea had attempted to keep his love for Jesus a secret, he boldly went to Pilot and asked for the body of Jesus to be placed in his trust. Joseph's actions provoked both the Roman and Jewish leaders and he eventually did spend time in prison for his support of Jesus. Malmsbury writes that after he had gotten out of prison and still fearing persecution he joined a team of missionaries led by the apostle Philip who set out toward Gaul where they landed near present day Marseilles, a Phoenician trading post. One night while Joseph lay asleep in his hut, he was wakened by radiant light. Joseph was told he should depart immediately the next day for Britain and bring the Good News to King Arvirgus, whom Joseph knew from his previous tin trading trips. With the eleven associates he sailed along the north shore of Cornwall and Devon and landed on the Somerset coast. At Glastonbury Joseph established the first missionary base in the British Isles.

Malmsbury writes: "In those days Avalon was called the Island of Apples, and also known to the people of the land as Ynis-witren, the Isle of Glassy Waters. He said it was Christmas Eve that Joseph and his companions reached the Isle of Avalon. With them they carried the Holy Grail hidden



beneath its cloth of snow-white samite. Heavily they toiled up the steep ascent of the hill called Weary-All. And when they reached the top Joseph thrust his thorn-staff into the ground". Joseph met with the pagan king and in time the king became a very fervent Christian. Years later his family would play a prominent role in bringing Christianity to Rome.

That Joseph of Arimathea was the first to preach the Gospel in Britain is also confirmed by many other writers. St. Gregory of Tours in his History of the Franks, and Haleca, Archbishop of Saragossa in his Fragments. The famous Vatican Librarian, Cardinal Baronius, discovered an ancient MS in the Vatican library telling of Joseph of Arimathea and the mission trip to Marseilles in 36 A. D. The Vatican recently released the contents of this document to the public to counter Dan Brown's allegations that Mary Magdeline bore Christ's child. This document lists all members of that mission trip, of which Mary was a member along with Lazarus and nine others.

Sir Henry Spelman wrote of Joseph's mission as did Publius Discipulus who wrote: "The church of Avalon in Britain had no other hands than those of the disciples of the Lord themselves built".

Theodore Martin (Lovar), in A.D. 1517 states; "It is not too much to say that the site of St. Mary's church in the abbey grounds at Glastonbury is the site of the first known above-ground church in the world". Archbishop Ussher writes: "The British National Church was founded A.D. 36, 160 years before heathen Rome confessed Christianity. Cressy, the Benedictine Monk and historian, tells us that St Joseph of Arimathea died at Glastonbury on July 27th, A.D. 82, and on his tombstone was written, in Latin, "After I had buried the Christ, I came to the Isles of the West; I taught; I entered into my rest."



After Joseph of Arimathea, the next well known missionary to Britain was Simon Zelotes, one of the twelve apostles. Dorotheus, Bishop of Tyre (A.D. 303) informs us that Simon Zelotes preached Christ all along the North Coast of Africa and then crossed to Britain. (Synopsis de Apostol 9, Simon Zelotes) Next came Aristobulus. The historian Alford (Regia Fides, Vol 1, p.&3) states, "It is perfectly certain that before St. Paul had come to Rome, Aristobulus was absent in Britain".

Sometime around 75 or 80 AD the first missionaries from John's church in Ephesus came into the northern Brittanic Isles and began building churches. The Church in Ephesus became an important influence to the established churches in northern Britain and Scotland. They accepted John's teaching that Easter should be celebrated at Passover, which became a trademark distinction of the Celtic Church.

Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire, had grown up in York. His mother, Helen, was a native Britain and a Christian. She was an influence in his conversion to Christianity. According to an account given in Lives of Saints, Published by John J. Crawley & Co, which is based on the writings of Eusebius, when Constantine was defending his empire from an attack by Maxentius with vastly superior forces, he suddenly remembered the crucified Christ his mother worshipped. It was then he knelt down and for the first time in his life prayed to God and received his now famous vision.

Prior to Charlemagne coming to power and establishing his Holy Roman Empire, the Celtic Church had grown to become the most dominant church in the world in terms of size. It had churches and monasteries that spread from Iceland all through the Brittanic Isles across Europe from Spain to the Slovak Empire in Eastern Europe and down to Northern Italy in the Lombard Kingdom. The church had no central seat of authority like the churches in Rome, Constantinople and North Africa and so it did not function in one voice. There were differences in how the churches worshipped.

How did the church grow to be so large? It grew because it had a different philosophy than the other churches. While the churches in Rome and Constantinople tied themselves to the political fortunes of the governments of their Empires the monks of the Celtic monasteries were perigeni's. A perigeni is a wanderer. There are many stories about monks getting in boats and drifting in the ocean for days and choosing to evangelize the first place the boat landed. This concept took Celtic missionaries in strange and far away places. St. Brendan the Navigator is perhaps the best known of all the Celtic perigeni's. It is said that he visited 5,000 different places building monasteries and churches where ever he went, from Iceland throughout the Brittanic Isles. St. Columbanus traveled across Europe building churches in Northern Italy to the Slavic Empire in Eastern Europe. He was not the first to build a Celtic Church in Rome's backdoor. That honor goes to Philip the Apostle and Lazarus who founded a Celtic church in Italy long before the Roman Catholic Church was established.



In fact, there is Archeological evidence throughout New England south into West Virginia in the United States which shows a decidedly Celtic influence in the construction of Chambers, Cairns, Dolmens, and Stone Circles. This combined with other evidence and oral tradition among Celtic and Native American populations, demonstrate that Celtic settlements existed in North America prior to

the arrival of Norse and Viking explorers.

Historians record that the Celtic Church played an important role in the early ecumenical councils. The first great council was held in 300 A.D. at the Council of Elvira in Spain. This was a council of all the existing Gallican Churches. The Celtic Church on the European continent was known as the Gallican Church and covered what is present day Spain, France, Switzerland and northern Italy. In Britain the Church was known simply as the Celtic Church. Again, in 314 A.D. three bishops from the Celtic Church in Britain attended the Council of Arles. And at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. the Celtic Church was again well represented, whereas the Roman church did not have a single bishop in attendance. In 359 A.D. when over 400 bishops met at the Council of Rimini to deal with the issue of Arianism, bishops from the Celtic Church were present. In 600 A.D. when Augustine came to Britain to establish a mission from Rome he was greeted by Christians from St. Martin's Celtic Church (named for St. Martin of Tours), in Canterbury. It was said that he worshipped there until his church could be built.



The Celtic monks were also known for something else. As Europe was plunged into the dark ages and barbarians raided and burned church libraries destroying ancient manuscripts monks in Celtic monasteries in Ireland and Scotland were busy copying ancient biblical texts. It was painstaking work and each page was copied from the text of the original page and then that page would be adorned with hand painted illustrations. Many of these texts survive to this day and many are dated centuries after the Synod of Whitby, when Rome contends the Celtic Church went away. The very existence of these books copied laboriously in Celtic monasteries is proof our church had not gone away.



Some of the better known books or missals as the Celts called them are The Book of Armagh from the 9th century, The Book of Deer from the early 9th century, The Book of Dimma from the 7th century, The Durham Gospels, The Lindisfarne Gospels and The Book of Durrow all from the 7th century. But of all these The Book of Kells from the mid 6th century is perhaps the best known of all the Celtic Missals. It survives and resides at Trinity College in Dublin.



By the eighth and ninth centuries, Celtic churches and monasteries extended all the way from Iceland to Italy and eastern Europe. By the 8th century, the Franks were the most important of the Germanic tribes. In 754, Pope Stephen visited the Frankish ruler Pepin the Short and entered into an alliance in order to save Rome from the invading Lombards. This was the beginning of papal

alignments with political governments that would begin to strengthen Rome's power and influence. Pepin's son, Charlemagne, who succeeded him as emperor made the deal of all deals with Rome. He proclaimed the Roman Church to be the only recognized church throughout the Holy Roman Empire and the Bishop of Rome in return crowned him Emperor of all the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day 800 AD in essence reconstituting the western Roman Empire. In return for being crowned emperor, Charlemagne set out to systematically destroy the Gallican Church (Celtic Church in Europe) by handing over control of all their churches and church property to the pope. This also marked the beginning of the the modern papacy.

The Bishop of Rome was declared to be the head of all the Western Christian churches by Charlemagne and he began to proclaim himself as the head of all churches holding numerous church councils and issuing papal decrees.

Charlemagne set out to overhaul the Roman Church, the second time an emperor would do so. He gave the Roman Church its first mature liturgy in which included the blessing of candles, impositions of ashes at the beginning of Lent, Maundy Thursday and the palm procession were all taken from the Gallican Church. He also tinkered with church doctrine and was responsible for introducing the controversial filioque clause to the Nicene Creed. All his tinkering combined with his efforts to create "one" church under the control of the Bishop of Rome created the impetus for the Eastern Orthodox Church falling out of communion with Rome in 1054 AD. The Orthodox Church refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the pope, like the Celtic and Coptic Churches.

By the turn of the first millennium, the Bishop of Rome faced another political reality and recognized the growing strength of the Normans. The Normans had destroyed the Lombard army in the last remaining kingdom, the Duchy of Benevento in northern Italy and with the Byzantines retaining control of southern Italy and the Moslems occupying nearby Sicily Rome recognized a need for a strong military ally. As the Normans came into Rome and defeated the small papal army, the Bishop of Rome struck an alliance with them to give them territory in Italy if they would expel the foreign invaders, which they proceeded to do. This alliance would affect Britain and Christianity there in the century to come.

When the Saxon King Edward the Confessor died in 1066 Harold Godwinson, his brother in law, who would be the last Saxon king, seized the throne. He defeated the Norwegian King who had invaded England and laid claim on the throne as an heir to Edward. But the Norman Duke of Normandy also claimed the English throne because he was a cousin of Edward and actually the closest blood relative. Hearing rumors of a planned invasion that was being financed by the pope only made the Saxons and the Saxon Church more leery of Rome. The rumor subsequently became a fact in 1066 when William did invade Britain in an



invasion encouraged and financed by the pope.



At first the Norman invasion was a positive thing for the Celts. William the Conqueror had brought with him many Celts from Brittany and much of the land that had been taken from them by the Saxons was restored to them. William was good for the Celtic Church. But 200 years later things changed. By the 1200's the Roman church was very corrupt, but tied politically to France. The pope used this to his advantage for gain playing the two monarchies against one another. The Norman King Henry II and his son John were strong Roman Catholics but found themselves out of favor with the pope (multiple wives, accused of holding back some of the church taxes, wanted to make war with Philip of France a favorite of the pope, and border wars with the Welsh).

John was despicable enough that he would marry off one of his illegitimate daughters to a Welsh prince under the pretense of making peace all the while he was planning an all out invasion against Wales, which was a Celtic Gaelic speaking nation and where the Celtic Church prospered and Rome had no influence there. The pope wanted England for its tax revenue and he wanted their churches. In order to avoid excommunication Henry ordered all the churches in England under the authority of the pope (Synod of Cashel in 1172). This was the second time a monarch had attempted to hand over churches in the country he ruled to Rome. They set out forcing people to convert to Roman Catholicism under the sword. History records a mass baptism in the sea by 10,000 Celts and Saxons who were forced under the sword to convert to Roman Catholicism. The Norman Conquest ultimately succeeded only in gaining control of the government of England in 1066, with Rome still unable to enforce her will in Wales, Scotland or Ireland where the Celtic Church continued.



By the early Middle Ages, the Church had retreated into the six Celtic nations, but didn't go away as has been commonly written. There is written proof of the existence of the church in the early Middle Ages and beyond. It is interesting to note that the antiquity of British Church, has been unequivocally affirmed by five Papal councils during the Middle Ages: At the Council of Pisa, A.D. 1409, the Council confirmed that the British Church took precedence of all others since it was founded out of Jerusalem shortly after the crucifixion of Christ. The Council of Constance in 1419 AD and the Council of Siena in 1423 made similar proclamations. At the Council of Basle in 1431 it was stated that the Celtic Church took precedence of all others because it was founded by Joseph of Arimathaea immediately after the passion of Christ. Up to the 12th century it was very common for Roman Catholic bishops to be assisted in their ordination by Celtic bishops.

Vatican records show lease agreements with Celtic churches in Ireland throughout the middle ages. The Celtic Church's independence was documented in the Declaration of Arbroath, signed by Scottish nobles at Arbroath, Scotland, in 1320 and sent to Pope John XXII, who was in exile in Avignon, France. It outlines a separate line of apostolic succession completely independent of Rome, which Rome acknowledged and to this day has yet to dispute. The conclusion was very similar to that of the Council of Augustine Oaks 600 years earlier.



By the time of the Reformation the Celtic Churches had given up their church properties to lessen persistent persecution from Rome. Celtic worship continued in the homes of the Scottish Highlands, Outer Hebrides and in Wales where ancient traditions were maintained, Gaelic spoken and Easter celebrated at Passover.

The Celtic Church was known to the Reformers and much of the liturgy in the Anglican Church was modeled after the Celtic Liturgy. The Orthodox Church recognizes the validity of Anglican Orders in part because several post reformation Anglican bishops were assisted in their ordination by Celtic bishops (Christopher Hampton, Archbishop of Armagh assisted the Archbishop of Canterbury in at least three Episcopal ordinations in the 17th century).

By 1700's most monasteries in Scotland, Ireland and Wales had shut down, but the 1700's were also peaceful times for the church. Since the church had given up control of its church properties some 500 years earlier they were no longer seen as a threat to Rome and the Roman Church left it alone. It remained small and seemed to be settled into a niche serving the outer Celtic lands and the Highlands of Scotland. The sufferings which the Scots underwent at the hand of other usurping religions and corrupt monarchs only served to deepen their faith. Worship moved to oratories and home settings, a format that continues today.

In the early 1800's the church came under attack again when the Highland Clearances began. This forced the church to go underground where it remained until the 20th century. The historian A. C. Flick wrote about the church at this time and said, "No religion ever has been destroyed by persecution if the people confessing it were not destroyed." Although the church became less visible, it continued to follow teachings that were given to it by the apostles and doing the work Christ commanded it to do.

During the 20th Century, several “break away” independent Protestant and Catholic church groups began to call themselves “Celtic”. However, many of these congregations were and remain unaffiliated with the Celtic Church in Scotland, the Coarb in North America, or the North American outreach of St. Brendan’s Province.

Today, the Celtic Church is beginning to see a revival, as much of the Western developed world has entered what some term a “Post-Christian” state. In this era, the mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have decidedly decreased in influence amid the influx of pagan beliefs and agnostic instruction. Because the Celtic Faith is relational based, rather than structurally based, it has the unique ability to evangelize on a personal level that other churches have only recently begun to explore.

Although The Celtic Church In Scotland is based in Scotland, it is becoming a world-wide organization, with members in America, Australia, Southeast Asia, Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom.

