

# The Celtic Branch of Christianity: The Interrelatedness of the Sacred and the Secular

Job 12:7-10 Romans 1:20 Psalm 8  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
October 22, 2023

## **Job 12:7-10**

- <sup>7</sup> 'But ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
<sup>8</sup> ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
<sup>9</sup> Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of God has done this?  
<sup>10</sup> In God's hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being.

## **Romans 1:20**

<sup>20</sup>Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.

**God is the source, Jesus is the root, and the diversities within Christianity are the branches. Where does College Hill find itself among the varied branches of Christianity?**

Broadly, let's start by stating we are on the **progressive branch**, rather than the conservative, traditional, evangelical, or fundamentalist branches. College Hill is on the **Presbyterian Church (USA) branch**, rather than on all the other Presbyterian branches, and rather than on Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Pentecostal, United Church of Christ, Nondenominational, etc, branches. College Hill is on the **Protestant branch**, rather than on the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox branches.

What we are going to explore today is the question: **Where does Celtic Christianity find itself on the tree of Christianity, and what are its distinctive characteristics?** First of all, let us not forget that all these branches are interconnected to the same root system, and the same source. Therefore, when we are commanded to love our neighbors, that includes all those who find themselves on different branches. And with God as the ultimate source, I would include all other faith traditions, even though with a different root system. As the saying goes: **We don't have to believe alike to love alike.**

In the era before the birth of Jesus, the northern neighbors of ancient Greece and Rome were known by the description KELTSOI, which meant strangers or hidden ones. By the way, that's why it's pronounced Celtic with as with a K sound, rather than the basketball team in Boston that chose to pronounce it as Celtic with an S sound. The ancient Celtic peoples, or tribes, spread from Galatia, now modern-day Turkey, to throughout northern Europe. They shared a family of languages now represented mainly by Gaelic, Irish, and Welsh.

With the emergence of the Roman Empire many of these tribes were pushed back to the western fringes of Europe, eventually leading to migrations to the islands of

Britannia. The Celts were further pushed to the northern highlands, of what became Scotland, and to Wales and then to Ireland when the Romans reached southern Britain by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. It is believed (among a few different theories) that by the early part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity made its way to pagan Ireland, crediting St. Patrick in 432 CE, then Columba in 560 CE who took it from Ireland to Iona, Scotland, then on from there. So yes, that means there is a **pre-Christian** form of Celtic spirituality and practice. Therefore, **not all that is identified as Celtic spirituality today is Christian. I will be addressing Celtic Christianity and Celtic Christian spirituality.**

One of the most important parts of Celtic history is that **Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire**, thus relatively separated from the later direct influence of popes and what became known as Roman Catholicism, of which it was technically a part. Also, it is very important to note that **there was a diversity of beliefs and practices of Christianity in its earliest years.** There was no uniform, monolithic form of Christianity until the Roman Catholic form later became dominant. Being so far from the power center of Rome, the isolated Christianity in the British Isles took on its own forms. Therefore, if we go back far enough, especially before Christian doctrines and practices became thoroughly institutionalized and imperialized, we will find a wealth of theology and spirituality that we can embrace, especially as progressives. That has been, and is, the experience of many when looking at the particular ancient Celtic influences on Christianity. That includes several here at College Hill who are part of our Celtic Circle small group, started nearly 11 years ago by Mark Miller.

**What happened to the Celtic branch of Christianity?** It flourished until the Council or **Synod of Whitby in 664 CE** when there was a debate over **which form of Christianity was the correct one, Celtic or Roman Catholic.** The initial dispute was about which had the correct dating of Easter. The head of the synod, the warrior King Oswiu (pronounced either 'oz-wee' or 'ahs-woo' or even -oz-wee-oo) of Northumbria, located in far northern Britain and southeast Scotland, declared his final decision. **The Celtic form of Christianity lost.**

Why have I just spent this much sermon time on history? Because of that last sentence. Celtic Christianity lost out in becoming the dominant understanding and branch of the Christian faith in the British Isles, and who knows where else it may have spread, because it lost to a decision made by a king. But it never died out completely! It has been alive at the edge of mainstream Christianity all through the centuries.

Here are some of those differences between Celtic and Roman Catholic. They make all the difference in our understanding of Christianity today. Roman Christianity was basically authoritarian, hierarchical, male dominated, rational, dogmatic, and strongly legalistic. Celtic Christianity was less authoritarian, more connected with nature, more comfortable dealing with the ancient pre-Christian Celtic religion, more mystical, and friendlier to women, who in turn had more say in church governance. They had a great respect for art, poetry, story-telling, community, and hospitality. Like Roman Catholicism, however, it was considered to be theologically orthodox when it came to the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, a sense of God's Presence with us.

All this leads us into a more practical and current understanding of what we call **Celtic Christian spirituality.** Here are some generalizations that are widely accepted today. One of the strongest themes running through Celtic spirituality is something you hear me recite as a benediction at the close of almost every service of worship. To summarize: **God goes before, behind, above, beneath, beside, and within us.** This benediction is actually an adaptation of an ancient hymn known as *St. Patrick's Breastplate*. Take note that there is **an astounding closeness to the Sacred Presence of the Divine, which encircles us as we journey through life.** One of the strongest characteristics of Celtic spirituality, then, is

**recognizing the Presence and activity of God in daily life, including in the most ordinary and menial of tasks and routines.**

There is another element in the Celtic tradition that resonates in profound ways today, again, especially with so many of those of us who identify as progressive Christians. It has made a profound difference in my theological understanding of the nature and character of God, thus my own journey of faith. **Are human beings inherently bad, or are we inherently good?** These questions were included in the arguments made at that Synod of Whitby in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. When the Roman church solidified its power and authority, it leaned heavily on the teachings of **4<sup>th</sup> century theologian St. Augustine**. One of the hallmarks of Augustine's theology was the concept of **original sin**, still prominent in modern Christianity, as it was in the theology of John Calvin during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago in central Europe, to which we Presbyterians trace our roots. Celtic historian and former dean of the Iona Abbey in Scotland, John Philip Newell, writes in his 1997 book, *Listening For the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*:

Augustine's thinking and the developing spirituality of the Church in the Roman world accentuated the evil in humanity and our essential unrighteousness... Augustine believed that from conception and birth we lack the image of God until it is restored in the sacrament of baptism..." [conveniently a function of the Church].

This understanding developed a spirituality that accentuated a division between the Church, which was seen as holy, on the one hand, and the life of the world, perceived as godless, on the other.

Our congregation's Book Study group is currently reading Matthew Fox's influential book, *Original Blessing*. **The understanding of humanity's original goodness counters the concept of original sin.** Rejecting the doctrine of original sin, however, is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, other theologians criticized it immediately, but then were later silenced. None was as influential as a **British-born 4<sup>th</sup> to early-5<sup>th</sup> century theologian named Pelagius, a contemporary of Augustine**. He maintained, as Newell writes, "the image of God can be seen in every newborn child and that, although obscured by sin, it exists at the heart of every person, waiting to be released through the grace of God." This eventually led to a trial in Rome and **Pelagius was found guilty of heresy and excommunicated**, which back then was tantamount to being condemned to hell. The Roman Catholic branch of Christianity rejected Pelagius' approach to understanding redemption and salvation, through the grace of God, as a sense of liberation from within.

This Celtic understanding led to looking to God's good creation, in addition to the Scriptures, to hear and receive the living Word of God. It was said, and I believe, **God reveals God's Self in two books: the book called the Bible, and the Book of Creation**. But let there be no misunderstanding. **This does not refer to worshiping nature as God (called pantheism), but rather worshiping God as revealed in and through the natural world, an affirmation of the wonder of the One who created nature.**

**Celtic spirituality reminds us that there is no real separation from the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material, because God is present at all times in all of what God has created.** To separate them is to set limits and put boundaries on God, to which Christianity, in general, is guilty. There is a profound sense, therefore, of **the stewardship of the earth and of all living things, to which God calls us to protect, revere, care for, and nurture**. That is why we took the many steps necessary to become an official member of the Presbyterian's national Earth Care Congregation program.

Finally, think of the implications of a Celtic Christian understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. **Deeper than any wrong in us, deeper than our sinfulness, is the light of God – that divine spark of God's image** that has been present in all things since the very beginning of creation itself. I encourage you, therefore, to look for the image of God deep within yourself, within your neighbor, and yes, that means within those with whom you and I seem to have little in common – theologically, politically, racially, culturally, whatever. Why? Because Jesus commanded us to do just that.

Our role as the church, therefore, becomes one of **working to help liberate rather than acting as the custodian of salvation**, which in my opinion is steeped in spiritual arrogance and issues of human power and control.

If I were to summarize the Celtic way of life and faith, it would be this, paraphrasing the words of John Philip Newell in his 2008 book, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*:

**What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God.**

**God's grace**, as we understand it as expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus, is given to **reconnect us to our own created nature, not to save us from our nature**. Imagine what it means to go through each day making every moment an occasion for acknowledging God's Presence, the Divine that is beyond, among, and within you and me, and all creation. This is part of the Celtic branch of Christianity. **I realize we may not all identify as being on the same branch, and that's fine, for we are connected to the same root and the same source.**

To close this sermon, we will be listening to a song, suggested by Mark Miller, our liturgist today who helped put this service together, reminding us that we are all on a journey, and that we never travel alone. The words to this song, **Every Long Journey, written and performed by Ann Reed**, are printed on the back of the bulletin if you would like to follow along.

Every long journey is made of small steps  
Is made of the courage the feeling you get  
When you know it's been waiting, been waiting for you  
The journey's the only thing you want to do

We cannot know what you go through or see through your eyes  
But we will surround you, the pride undisguised  
In any direction whatever you view  
You're taking our love there with you

In every long journey what drives you to go  
It's half what you know and half what you don't  
The secret's been waiting your heart's got the key  
The secret's the only thing you want to see

Every long journey begins with a dream  
A spirit with courage to make it all real  
The dream has been calling, been calling to you  
The dream is the only thing you want to do

Amen.

## Resources:

- John Philip Newell:
  - Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, 2008.
  - Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, 1997.
  - The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality*, 1999.
- H. Stephen Shoemaker, *The Celtic Christian Way*, shoemakerstudy.com, 2018.
- Northumbria Community, *Celtic Spirituality – A Beginner's Guide*, northumbriacommunity.org
- faithandworship.com, *What is the influence of the Celtic Church?*
- Rev. Carol S Wedell, sermon: *You Asked for It: Celtic Spirituality*, Fairmount Presbyterian Church, Cleveland, August 8, 2004.
- Harry L. Serio, *Walkers Between Worlds: The Celtic Mystic Tradition in a Postmodern Age*
- Loren Wilkinson, "Saving Celtic Spirituality," from *Christianity Today*, 4-24-2000.
- *Features of Celtic Spirituality*, from [www.allsaintsbrookline.org/celtic.html](http://www.allsaintsbrookline.org/celtic.html)
- *Stuart's Celtic Christianity Page*, <http://www2.gol.com/users/stuart/celtihs.html>



Approaching Iona Abbey, Scotland, by ferry.  
 Photo by Rev. Todd Freeman while on sabbatical, 5-16-15