

The Ancient Celtic Church in Britain

by Leslie Hardinge (New York: TEACH Services, 1995)

I here include this summary of Leslie Harginge's book about the British Celtic Church, by Richard Nickels, to show, along with the concluding information, that the gates of hell could not prevail against the true Church, Matthew 16:18, *'And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'*

Today it continues to carry forward God's word in small independent groups in nations around the world:

"Before the coming of Augustine to England in A.D. 597, the Christian Church in the British Isles was profoundly Celtic, rather than Roman. The beliefs and practices of the Celtic Christian Church were much closer to that of the first century Church than the Church of Rome. Seventh-day Adventist Leslie Hardinge has compiled a most fascinating, well-documented book on the Celtic Church.

Foremost in the Celtic belief was an insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible, with a tendency to reject the writings of the "Church Fathers," and a disdain for the authority of Church Councils (Council of Elders). The Celtic Church did not have a central governmental leader. Leslie Hardinge notes on page 48, "But while the Celtic theologian was keenly interested in the whole of the Scriptures, his preoccupation with the Ten Commandments was even deeper. The earliest [Celtic] Christian service included a recitation of the Decalogue." In short, "no differences were made between the ethics and morality, the legal system and theology, of the Old and New Testaments," (page 202).

Many Celtic believers were Arians (anti-Trinitarian). They kept the Sabbath, believing that the day begins at sundown. They were known to be Quarto-decimans, observers of the annual Lord's Supper, or Christian Passover, on the fourteenth day of the first month in spring. They eschewed unclean meats. Their ministry had to be recognized, even by outsiders, to be honest and above reproach, and celibacy was not practiced until later times.

The legendary Patrick (ca. 387-463) was born a Briton, and evangelized Ireland. He was said to have founded over 300 churches and baptized more than 120,000 converts, earning him the title of patron saint of Ireland. However, Christianity existed in Ireland long before his time.

Wherever Patrick went and established a church, he left an old Celtic law book, *Liber ex Lege Moisi (Book of the Law of Moses)*, along with the books of the Gospel. The *Liber* begins with the Decalogue, and continues with selections from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Citing Exodus 23:1-19, Part 4 of the *Liber* emphasizes that the Sabbath is to be kept, along with three annual feasts. Part 5, referring to Exodus 31:13, notes that the Sabbath is a sign of God's people, and must be kept. Patrick practiced laying on of hands after baptism for the receipt of the Holy Spirit. While "St. Patrick" is revered as a Roman Catholic saint, his writings appear to place him squarely in the Sabbath-keeping Messianic tradition.

Hardinge indicates that the Celtic British Isles had a long history of Sabbath-keeping. Professor James C. Moffatt, DD, in his 1882 book, *The Church in Scotland*, p. 140, states, "It seems to have been customary in the Celtic churches of early times, in Ireland as well as Scotland, to keep Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, as a day of rest from labour. They obeyed the fourth commandment literally upon the seventh day of the week."

However, attacks on these Sabbath-keeping Celts was eventually launched from Rome itself. Emperor Justinian, who in A.D. 538 had attacked "heretics" in Europe, utilized the papacy to unify his empire. Gregory I (?-604), the first real "pope" in the sense of wielding considerable political power, was a champion of Sunday observance. But around A.D. 600, there were still so many Sabbath-keepers that even Pope Gregory the Great had to walk a narrow line, in his letter to the Roman people: "It has come to my ears that certain men of perverse spirit have sown among you some things that are wrong and opposed to the holy faith, so as to forbid any work being done on the Sabbath day. What else can I call these but preachers of Antichrist, who, when he comes, will cause the Sabbath day as well as the Lord's day to be kept free from all work," (Hardinge, page 85).

When Gregory learned of the Sabbath-keeping Celts in the British Isles, he became incensed. In 597, Gregory sent Augustine and a band of Benedictine monks to convert England to the Roman Catholic faith. By force and persuasion, Augustine proved to be successful. In 601, Gregory made Augustine (?-604) the first Archbishop of Canterbury. (This Augustine is not to be confused with St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, 354-430.)

Italian forces in Britain eventually won out, and changed the Celtic Church practices to match those of Rome. Southern Ireland succumbed in 632, Northern Ireland by 695, most of Scotland by 717, and South and North Wales in 768 and 777 respectively. Pockets of resistance in remote areas held out, but the die was cast: the Celtic Church with its apostolic traditions gave way to Sunday and other tenets of Rome.

Besides Patrick, other prominent Celtic preachers were Columba (ca. 521-597), who founded a colony on the Island of Iona and converted parts of Scotland, and Columban (543-615), an Irish preacher who went to France and was convicted by a synod of French bishops for keeping Easter according to the Celtic usage. He was forced to leave for Switzerland, and later Italy, where at Bobbio, he founded a monastery in Waldensian country.

Hardinge notes that a key issue of conflict between the Roman and Celtic churches was the date of Easter. "When they [the Celts] eventually relinquished their adherence to this point in favour of Rome, they surrendered their independence on all points and soon became fused with Roman Christianity," page 96.

Another surprising conclusion has much relevance for us today. To its detriment, the Celtic Church was not unified. Hardinge notes, "Each group seems to have been dependent upon the founder and his tribe, but independent of all others.... No church leader among the Celts was held to be the spokesman of all.... There was little unity of purpose. Had they presented a united front, the Celtic Church might have lasted for centuries, but they were absorbed into Roman Christianity piece by piece, and the remnants which withstood, weakened and alone, finally disappeared," page 207. *[On the other hand, if they relied on strong central human leaders, is it possible that one of them would have become corrupt and caused the entire group of them to go astray much sooner? Something to think about! —SN Editor]*

There is nothing inherently wrong with local church leadership. But, when there is a common enemy, the Almighty's people must rally together, and work together. Today, we face a similar attack against the Sabbath and the fundamentals of our belief. Are we going to give in to the enemy one by one? Or instead, will we co-operate with one another? Will we work together, or will we become a relic of history?

Joseph Tkach, Jr., leader of the Worldwide Church of God, believes that Sabbath-keepers today have a short lineage. He says Sabbath-keeping churches can trace their history only as far back as seventeenth century British Separatists and Puritans. *The Celtic Church in Britain* destroys this theory. For six hundred years and more, the Celtic Church in the British Isles generally observed the seventh day Sabbath, kept a Quartodeciman Passover, eschewed unclean meats, and avoided a hierarchical government like that of Rome. That makes them our spiritual ancestors in deed.

Leslie Hardinge's book paints an interesting picture of the beliefs and practices of Celtic believers. His extensive footnotes and bibliography indicate much research. For those who cherish the history of Sabbath-keepers, *The Celtic Church in Britain* is a real treasure house. It is available from the **Bible Sabbath Association, 3316 Alberta Drive, Gillette, WY 82718**. Or call toll Free: **888-687-5191**.”

—Richard Nickels

Leslie Hardinge was wrong though about the Celtic Church dying out completely by the 8th century. In fact, it continued to survive in isolated islands off the West coast of Scotland until living memory.

A few years ago in Melbourne I was privileged to meet an old lady called Margaret (Meg) McCormack, who has since passed away in her nineties. She had been raised on the Island of Arran at Lamash, by her farmer grandfather Willie Young. With him she attended the Church of God at Whiting Bay, some three miles from Lamash.

Services were held on Friday evenings after sunset and twice on Saturday. There was one full time minister Ebenezer Muchie and three elders not employed by the Church, serving a congregation of about 200. Their services consisted of songs, a sermon expounding the scriptures, and lasted about one and a half hours. People chose which service to attend.

Passover was kept on the 14th [Of the first month, Abib], and the Night to be Remembered, the next night, in individual homes. Unleavened bread was eaten during the week after Passover, in unleavened homes. The other Feast days, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement (the fast), Tabernacles and the Last Great Day were all observed [Leviticus 23].

Baptism was by immersion, unclean foods were not eaten. It was understood that man's destiny, if faithful, was to be born into the family of God at the resurrection.

The Church understood that Britain was Ephraim, the USA Manasseh and that North Western Europe was descended from Ancient Israel, though Germany from Assyria. They knew of Jeremiah bringing two of King Hezekiah of Israel's daughters, a harp and King David's

coronation stone [Stone of Scone] to Ireland and also believed he taught the people of Scotland God's way.

A simple form of tithing according to resources, paid Church expenses and helped the poor and those in need.

As the early Christian Church in Britain is believed to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea in AD37, what became known as the British Celtic Church existed for hundreds of years before the first Roman Catholic Church missionaries arrived.

Christians who follow Jesus Christ's instructions in 1Peter 2:21 and Jude verse 3 would therefore be wise to emulate the beliefs of those who so early followed in His footsteps. *'For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.'* *'Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.'*

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