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## Book Review: The Celtic Way of Evangelism

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## **The Celtic Way of Evangelism**

**Reviewed by Jeffrey Mansell**

*Hunter, George G. The Celtic Way of Evangelism. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000. 121 pages. \$13.00.*

*The Celtic Way of Evangelism* is an examination of the spread of Christianity into what is now known as the British Isles and Western Europe in the fifth to seventh centuries. This movement was largely spawned by the ministry of St. Patrick who was a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church. The unique style of ministry employed by St. Patrick contrasted sharply with extant methodologies being used by his contemporaries but proved vital in bringing vast numbers of “barbarians” to faith in Christ and birthing a missional movement that spanned several centuries. Hunter draws important parallels between effective historical methods and strategies needed to reach today’s neo-barbarians.

*The Celtic Way of Evangelism* was written by George G. Hunter III, Ph.D. Hunter is the Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, and Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Asbury Theological Seminary. Hunter holds degrees from Florida State University, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Princeton University and a Ph.D. from Northwestern University where he majored in Communication Theory. Hunter has authored ten books including *Church for the Unchurched* and *How To Reach Secular People*. He is a sought after-seminar speaker on the topic of church growth and is considered a leader in that movement.

Beginning with his plunge into slavery to a Druid tribal chief in Ireland, Hunter re-tells the story of St. Patrick’s ministry among the Celtic people and the influence his life had on several generations of missionaries that would follow him. St. Patrick

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escaped from his enslavement but at the age of 48 returned to the land of his captors as a Roman Catholic bishop with a ministry team and the gospel message. Ministering with an insider's advantage he was able to contextualize the message in such a way that vast numbers of persons came to faith.

A major thesis throughout the book is the contrasting approach to ministry that existed between Patrick and the Roman Catholic Church. Hunter develops this Celtic approach in great detail, exposing its effectiveness achieved through monastic communities, the ministry of conversation, ministering to the "middle-level" of life, and other devices. The Roman Church was largely critical of this new approach. An unyielding air of superiority emanated from Rome and eventually succeeded in forcing the priests to submit to the "Roman way."

Hunter contends that significant parallels exist between the Celtic world and contemporary society. Based upon his assessment that current culture is now post-modern he believes that many of the methods and the philosophy that guided Patrick and his people should be re-visited by today's church. A process approach to conversion, engaging persons in the ministry of conversation, paying the price to understand the culture in order to make the message indigenous, a renewed sensitivity to the natural world and an emphasis on the immanence of God are elements of Patrick's ministry that Hunter believes has application today. He contends, however, reminiscent of Patrick's day, that the religious hierarchy continues its efforts to suppress ministry that it does not consider consistent with its heritage. He illustrates this by drawing attention to the ecclesiastical debate that is underway in Africa (46).

The final section of the book provides specific examples of churches that are ministering (sometimes unknowingly) in the Celtic tradition. There is also a strong case made for the church to more fully invest itself in ministry to addicts and in the recovery movement. He closes by calling the church to reach the "New Barbarians who are all around us" (121) because of his contention that this is a population group that is demonstrating receptivity to the gospel.

If Hunter's contention that post-modernity mirrors Celtic culture is true, and it appears that many parallels do exist, then his book is a valuable resource for church leaders seeking to understand their community and who are searching for effective methods to communicate the gospel. Hunter demonstrates an exceptional grasp of the historical narrative of the Celtic Christian movement and deftly makes application to the current state of ecclesiastical affairs in North America as it relates to its in-

volvement in Great Commission ministry. His instructions and admonition are to be commended to the Church.

Hunter delves into the historic Christian mission debate which asks, "Should the missionary concentrate on Christianizing or Civilizing (15) the barbarians?" He indicates this debate is crucial because it goes to the heart of Patrick's philosophy of indigenization. Patrick's success lay in the fact that he understood the Celtic people and their culture. Patrick concentrated on "Christianizing" the Celts without dismantling their "civilization." Hunter correctly contends that "When you understand the people, you will often know what to say and do and how. When the people know that the Christians understand them, they infer that maybe the High God understands them, too. (20)" For this purpose Patrick's priests wore their hair in styles similar to Celtic priests and they made use of their existing celebration days and ceremonies (93). Contextualization of the gospel message through use of the people's language, music and stories, Hunter would say, continues to be essential in the fine art of persuasion among a foreign population (80).

Hunter's development of the issue of communication is an important contribution. His doctoral work in communication theory lends special credibility to this discussion. He writes that Aristotle believed that persuasion comes from the interplay between the speaker, the message, and the audience within the cultural context (57). Contemporary communicators would benefit from reading Hunter's expanded discussion of Aristotle's treatment of logos, ethos and pathos. I found this section personally beneficial in reinforcing the truth that an audience's adoption of a message is influenced by their perception of the character of the speaker. Adoption is further enhanced through the use of the common vernacular as evidenced by St. Patrick's use of the Celtic language and idioms familiar to them.

Hunter is driven in his writing by his strong bias toward evangelism. His passion for secular people provides an incentive to call the church, an organization he considers to be laggards in reaching the unsaved masses, to renewed activity in its obedience to the Great Commission. He stresses the importance of Patrick's pattern of communicating the possibility of hope (62) yet expresses pessimism regarding his belief that the church, en mass, can break from its lethargy and its top-down suppression of those isolated churches that do demonstrate strong evangelistic ministries.

While true to a point, I feel that Hunter's disgust for church hierarchy that seeks to bring local ministries into conformity with national policy is overstated. His disgust is especially tar-

geted towards those denominations he labels as, "Born in Europe." He strongly feels that executives in these denominations have erroneously kept local churches chained to historic methods that are no longer relevant. He has a valid argument.

However, having once been a denominational executive he should have some empathy for that group of leaders that are charged with maintaining the integrity of the body from the well-intentioned but wrong-headed. None should knowingly suppress the obvious workings of the Holy Spirit as he moves in a fresh way across the church. Unfortunately, the ability to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit is not always 20/20 which leads denominational executives to generally error to the side of caution.

The ability to make the past speak so clearly to the present is a great accomplishment in this book. While not every concept will translate clearly to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the idea of monastic communities which were towns for believers and seekers, the principles embodied in the concept have application. Especially salient is his discussion of the Celtic understanding that coming to faith is a process that is worked out over time. Included in that process is the important ministry of conversation and explanation. Further, is the opportunity afforded the seeker to live among the members of the community of faith and to participate in the life of the community before making a commitment. This has excellent application for current ministry to the multitude of persons who have no Christian memory and very limited understanding of the Christian faith. The demand for an immediate response from these individuals to an initial presentation of the gospel is absurd. The opportunity, however, to experience the faith before committing to the faith makes great sense.

Hunter indicates that pressure from Rome eventually succeeded in forcing priests in the line of St. Patrick to adopt and even embrace Roman ecclesiology. His treatment of these priests is, in my opinion, too gracious. The obvious superiority of the Celtic method over Rome's should have motivated these priests to take a more determined stand. What contributed to their acquiescing to Rome's dictate? Was the transmission of values from generation to generation inadequate? Had their been a cultural shift that validated the Roman way in the minds of these later priests? Unfortunately Hunter does not develop this lapse in any great detail.

Hunter masterfully pulls from history an approach to missional ministry that is ripe for today's post-modern society. Ministers and lay persons have much to gain by a careful study of

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his research into a movement that impacted a continent for Christ. The principle of paying the price to understand the language and culture of the intended audience practiced by St. Patrick is essential in any age to the successful communication of the gospel message and the winning of the masses to Christ.

Reviewer

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