

A Pastor to Pastor Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

COLUMBANUS



T. M. MOORE

Readings and Meditations from Scripture and the Team-building Sermons
Of the Greatest of the Irish *peregrini*

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Columbanus: Sermons
Readings and Reflections
T. M. Moore
A Pastor to Pastor Resource

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Introduction

Welcome to *Columbanus: Sermons*, an introduction, in his own words, to the greatest of the Irish missionary/monks who, in the words of Thomas Cahill, “saved civilization” during the 6th and 7th centuries.

Columbanus (543-615 AD) was a scholar, preacher, missionary, and disciple-maker. His life to the age of 40 was taken up with preparing for ministry and teaching at the great Irish monastery of Bangor.

But then God called him to lead a team of missionaries to Gaul (modern France), since the light of the Gospel was flickering dimly there. It was there, during the remaining years of his life, that Columbanus accomplished the work and left the legacy which make him one of the great leaders of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD).

We'll begin our meditations on Columbanus' sermons with a week of excerpts from his first biographer, the Monk Jonas. Writing very shortly after Columbanus' death, Jonas sought to publish a faithful record of the greatness of the saint. He will help us get to know this extraordinary man of faith.

Then we'll turn to the extant sermons of Columbanus, to discover what we can learn about shepherding the Lord's flocks. In subsequent series we'll look at Columbanus' letters, poems, and monastic rules.

The entries in this, as in every *Pastor to Pastor* study, are arranged for a month of readings, one reading per day followed by a series of Questions for Reflection or Discussion at the end of the week. We're happy to provide these readings at no charge for you to use, personally and with your staff or church leaders. Please feel free to make copies for your leadership team or to forward the link or PDF to as many people as you like. If you find these meditations beneficial, we hope you'll consider making a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe to help support this and our many other outreaches to the Church.

We hope you will find this study helpful and encouraging as you continue the Lord's work in building His Church, His Body, His Bride.

T. M. Moore, Principal
The Fellowship of Ailbe
www.ailbe.org

Week 1, Day 1

The Way of Salvation

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" John 21.15

*Jonas, Life of St. Columban*¹

"Away, O youth! Away! Flee from corruption in which, as you know, many have fallen. Forsake the path which leads to the gates of hell.' The youth, trembling at these words, which were such as to terrify a youth, thanked her for her reproaches, took leave of his companions and set out. His mother in anguish begged him not to leave her. But he said, 'Hast thou not heard, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"?' He begged his mother, who placed herself in his way and held the door, to let him go. Weeping and stretched upon the floor, she said she would not permit it. Then he stepped across the threshold and asked his mother not to give way to her grief; she would never see him again in this life, but wherever the way of salvation led him, there he would go."

So began the journey of Columbanus (543-615 AD), the greatest of the Irish *peregrini*, those wandering missionary/monks whose labors made such a powerful impact for the Gospel in the 7th and 8th centuries. As a youth Columbanus feared he might not escape the temptations of the young ladies in his native village. So he consulted a wise old woman, seeking advice. Jonas, writing shortly after the death of Columbanus, tells us the result. The future founder of monasteries and disciple-maker of saints left his home and headed to the school of Senilis, to begin instruction in the Word of God. There, Jonas tells us, "Columban collected such treasures of holy wisdom in his breast that he could, even as a youth, expound the Psalter in fitting language and could make many other extracts worthy to be sung, and instructive to read." Columbanus left the love of family and friends to take up the love of God's Scripture unto the way of salvation. He never looked back.

Next Steps: Meditate on Job 23.12 and Jeremiah 15.16. To what extent do these verses describe your own attitude toward the Word of God? Can you honestly say with the psalmist, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day"?

Week 1, Day 2

The Disciplined Life

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should have become disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9.27

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

"Then he endeavored to enter a society of monks, and went to the monastery at Banchor (in the Count of Ulster, in Ireland). The abbot, the holy Comgall, renowned for his virtues, was a faithful father to his monks and was held in high esteem for the fervour of his faith and the order and discipline which he preserved. Here Columban gave himself entirely to fasting and prayer, to bearing

¹ All quotations from Jonas, *Life of St. Columban*, Dana Carleton Munro, ed. (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1993).

the easy yoke of Christ, to mortifying the flesh, to taking the cross upon himself and following Christ, in order that he who was to be the teacher of others might show the learning, which he taught, more fruitfully by his own example in mortifying his own body; and that he who was to instruct others might first instruct himself.”

Over the past forty years of ministry I've known and worked with many pastors. And if there's one thing the majority of them have had in common, it is the poor and dissatisfying use of spiritual disciplines. For too many pastors the disciplines that should shape their souls and form their bodies for sacrificial service – reading, meditation, solitude, prayer, fasting, singing, and so forth – are too easily elided into their weekly tasks. The result is not much spiritual vitality or vision, little ability to disciple others, and many who have either forsaken the ministry or fallen out of it because of sin. Columbanus knew he would be of no long-term use to the Lord without a disciplined life. His life proved the truth of his convictions.

Next Steps: How would you describe the state of your spiritual life at this time? Do you have a pastor friend to encourage you and hold you accountable in this area? If you would like one, write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org, and I'll see what I can do to help.

Week 1, Day 3

The Spirit of Caleb

“And now, behold, the LORD has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years, ever since the LORD spoke this word to Moses...and now, here I am this day, eighty-five years old...Now therefore give me this mountain...” Joshua 14.10, 12

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

“Having collected a band of brethren, St. Columban asked the prayers of all, that he might be assisted in his coming journey, and that he might have their pious aid. So he started in the thirtieth year of his life, and under the guidance of Christ went to the seashore with twelve companions. Here they waited to see if the mercy of the Almighty would allow their purpose to succeed, and learned that the Spirit of the all-merciful Judge was with them. So they embarked, and began the dangerous journey across the channel and sailed quickly with a smooth sea and favourable wind to the coast of Brittany.”

Actually, Columbanus was probably forty years old when he left his teaching post at Bangor and, with twelve companions, undertook “to go into the strange lands, in obedience to the command which the Lord gave Abraham” (Jonas). The remaining years of his life would be spent teaching, evangelizing, facing down wicked rulers, reforming churches, and creating communities of disciples. Like Caleb, Columbanus was not content to rest on his laurels. He was eager for a new challenge and ready to assume it once the Lord opened the way for him. We're never too old, or never too long in ministry – even in the same place in ministry – to seek the Lord for greater challenges.

Next Steps: How do you avoid falling into a rut in ministry? Where do you turn to seek out new challenges and opportunities for the Kingdom of God? Talk with some of your church leaders about these questions.

Week 1, Day 4

Walking the Talk

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5.16

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

“Everywhere that he went the noble man preached the Gospel. And it pleased the people because his teaching was adorned by eloquence and enforced by examples of virtue. So great was his humility and that of his followers that just as the children of this world seek honour and authority, so they on the contrary vied with one another in the practice of humility...Such piety and love dwelt in them all, that for them there was only one will and one renunciation. Modesty and moderation, meekness and mildness adorned them all in equal measure. The evils of sloth and dissension were banished. Pride and haughtiness were expiated by severe punishments. Scorn and envy were driven out by faithful diligence. So great was the might of their patience, love and mildness that no one could doubt that the God of mercy dwelt among them.”

The people of Gaul, to which Columbanus and his troop went with the Gospel, were a combination of rank pagans and worldly Christians. Little in the way of spiritual vitality existed among the Gauls, although those who could made the most of the veneer of Christianity which yet remained. Kings and their courts, and the priests who served under their protection, were worldly, ambitious, and not accustomed to being disobeyed. They were in for a shock. Columbanus and his company were men of such honor and spiritual depth, and they preached and taught so clearly and consistently, that it didn't take long for word to spread throughout the realm that something new was in town. These Irish monks talked the talk, and they walked it, too.

Next Steps: What opportunities do the people of your church have to see in your life the reality of what you preach and teach? Discuss this question with your church's leaders.

Week 1, Day 5

Streaming In?

*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the LORD's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And peoples shall flow to it.
Many nations shall come and say,
“Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths.”* Micah 4.1, 2

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

“Here then [Luxeuil] the excellent man began to build a monastery. At the news of this people streamed in from all directions in order to consecrate themselves to the practice of religion, so that the large number of monks scarcely had sufficient room. The children of nobles from all directions

strove to come thither; despising the spurned trappings of the world and the pomp of present wealth, they sought eternal rewards.”

Luxeuil was the second monastery Columbanus established in Gaul, Annegray being the first. The result was the same in each place. When people found out where the great man was staying, they came to him to learn the Word of God and devote themselves to following Christ. Micah foresaw such a day, and he said that the reason this would happen was that “out of Zion the law shall go forth, And the word of the LORD...” (v. 2) Where the witness of the Gospel is lived and taught, people will be drawn to the life-giving Word and Spirit of Christ (Jn. 6.63).

Next Steps: In what ways is the Word of the Lord going forth from your congregation into the surrounding community? Are you leading the way in bringing “other sheep” into the Lord’s flock (Jn. 10.16)?

Week 1, Day 6

Nathan to the King

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” 2 Samuel 12.7

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

“The fame of Columban had already penetrated into all parts of Gaul and Germany, and everyone was praising the venerable man. [King] Theuderich too came often to him and humbly begged his prayers...As he very often visited Columban, the holy man began to reprove him because he sinned with concubines, and did not satisfy himself with the comfort of a lawful wife, in order to beget royal children from an honoured queen, and not bastards by his concubines. After this reproof from Columban, the king promised to abstain from such sinful conduct.”

Ultimately, Columbanus’ insistence on virtue in the Frankish court would get him run out of the country. Columbanus feared no man, not even the most powerful kings of Gaul. The Gospel and its requirements are the same for every person, regardless of their social status. Theuderich, Jonas tells us, “thought that he was fortunate in having St. Columban in his kingdom.” Well, most of the time. Ultimately, the king’s mother, Brunhilda, would conspire with nobles and bishops to send Columbanus into exile, but not before he had sent many young men into the churches and fields of Gaul with Good News of repentance and faith in Jesus. Not everyone will be thrilled with our preaching. We need to make sure Jesus is.

Next Steps: Is there a role for the preacher as prophet in his community, that is, the community beyond the local church? What would that look like? Talk with some fellow ministers about these questions.

Week 1, Day 7

What a Friend!

*A man who has friends must himself be friendly,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18.24*

Jonas, Life of St. Columban

“As they journeyed, they came to the city which was formerly called Maguntiacum (Mainz). The oarsmen who had been sent by the king to aid the man of God, told him they had friends in the city would supply needful food; for already they had been long fasting. The man of God told them to go; but they did not find any. They returned, and in reply to the questions of the man of God said they had been unable to obtain anything from their friends. Then he said, ‘Let me go for a short time to my friend.’ They wondered how he had a friend there, where he had never been before. But he went to the church and, entering, threw himself on the pavement, and in a long prayer sought the protection of God, the source of all mercy. Immediately the bishop from the city went from his home to the church and, finding Columban, asked who he was. The latter said he was a pilgrim. The bishop answered: ‘If you need food, go to my house and take what you need.’”

What a Friend we have in Jesus, Who knows our needs and meets them all through His riches in glory! These days, I suppose, Columbanus would have been advised on how to write a direct mail fund-raising letter, or organize a pledge campaign, or schmooze some wealthy potential donor. The Lord meets the needs of His servants, as they plead earnestly with Him for their mission. Celtic Christians “traveled light” as we say; they had very little in the way of personal property. Most of the time they worked with their own hands to satisfy their material needs. But even then, prayer was the first tool in their kit to which they turned for their daily bread. So must it be for us as well.

Next Steps: How much time do you and your church leaders spend praying for the material needs of your church and your community?

For reflection or discussion

1. Columbanus was a man of vision, vision forged out of his deep study of Scripture, vigorous personal discipline, and faithful ministry to the Lord’s people. How would you describe the vision that animates and guides your life and ministry at this time?
2. Columbanus understood the importance of working with a team of like-minded servants. As we shall see, he worked diligently to instruct, guide, encourage, and strengthen that team. Does your church have a strong, growing team of leaders? What is your role in helping to create and maintain such a team?
3. Like many of the Irish *peregrini* of this period, Columbanus maintained a balance of study, spiritual disciplines, hard physical and pastoral work, and team-building in all his ministry endeavors. Do you have anything to learn from him in any of these areas?
4. Columbanus left a legacy of disciples, writings, and institutions – four monastic establishments – to help ensure the work he’d done would continue after him. How would you describe the legacy you are seeking to leave (cf. Ps. 45.17)?
5. From what you’ve seen thus far, what are you hoping to learn from Columbanus, as we turn to a quick overview of his sermons? What are your goals for this study?

Prayer:

Week 2, Day 1

The First Thing

Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ. To this end I also labor... Colossians 1.28, 29

Sermon I²

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Since I bear the responsibility for very needful teaching, first of all I may briefly speak of the first thing for all to know. I desire that what is the basis of all men’s salvation should be the foundation of our talk, and that our doctrine should commence from that point whence all that is arises and what has not been begins, and that the heart’s belief should open the gateway of our talk, rightly opening, as it does, the mouths of all Christian believers to a salutary confession.”

Columbanus was the greatest of the Irish *peregrini* who re-evangelized much of Europe during the seventh century. He insisted that all preaching must have its beginning and ending in the Gospel of salvation – in the message of our Lord Jesus Christ. These days many preachers seem to assume the Gospel rather than proclaim it. Columbanus believed that faithfully proclaiming the Gospel was important in helping believers to confess it as they should. As he understood it, all our doctrine, indeed, everything in life, arises from the Fount which is Jesus, and all our faith should be directed toward Him. The first thing we need to understand as preachers and disciple-makers is that Jesus is the First Thing – and the Last – in everything we do.

Next Steps: In your own preaching and teaching, do you proclaim the Gospel or do you tend to assume that most of your hearers already know it? Even if they do, what benefits can come from faithfully preaching the Gospel? Talk with your church leaders about how, together, you might make Jesus more the First Thing of everything you do in ministry.

Week 2, Day 2

Only Believe

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10.17

Sermon I

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Who shall examine the secret depths of God? Who shall dare to treat of the eternal source of the universe? Who shall boast of knowing the infinite God, Who fills all and surrounds all, Who enters into all and passes beyond all, Who occupies all and escapes all? Whom none has ever seen as He is. Therefore let no man venture to seek out the unsearchable things of God, the nature, mode and cause of His existence. These are unspeakable, undiscoverable, unsearchable; only believe in simplicity and yet with firmness, that God is and shall be even as He has been, that God is immutable.”

²All quotations are from G. S. M. Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), pp. 61 ff.

Heresies frequently arise when men speculate about God beyond what Scripture actually reveals. This is a temptation for those called to ministry of the Word – to find some “angle” or “take” on Scripture that will give us an edge or a unique identity. Columbanus saw through the vanity of this and counseled humility and faith in handling the Word of God, the former to keep us from becoming high-minded and the latter to allow us truly to plumb the depths of all that God has revealed to us of Himself. Do we want to know God? Let us look to Jesus (the Greek has “word of Christ” here rather than “word of God”). Unless our meditations, speculations, and studies of God find their fulfillment in Jesus, we do not truly know God. For Jesus makes God known (Heb. 1.3), and the Scriptures make Jesus known (Jn. 5.39).

Next Steps: How would you counsel a young preacher to guard himself against the temptation to want to make a name for himself? How about a Bible study leader?

Week 2, Day 3

The Perfection of a Good Life

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. 1 Timothy 4.12

Sermon I

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Therefore seek the supreme wisdom, not by verbal debate, but by the perfection of a good life, not with the tongue but with the faith which issues from singleness of heart, not with that which is gathered from the guess of a learned irreligion. If then you seek the unutterable by discussion, He will fly further from you than He was; if you seek by faith, wisdom shall stand in her accustomed station at the gate, and where she dwells she shall at least in part be seen.”

Preachers must work hard at knowing the Lord, not simply through the study of His Word, but by the example of lives devoted to holiness. This is a work of faith, and requires us to seek the Lord Who is the Wisdom of God, and Who reveals Himself in His Word and through the creation. We are accustomed, increasingly, to seeing pastors fall to one or another temptation of the flesh. They hurt more than their own ministries when they do. When pastors exemplify the wisdom of Christ through lives of holiness, love, and service, the words they preach will carry much more weight, and the lives they lead will show the true way of wisdom to the saints.

Next Steps: Paul says we must “work out our salvation” (Phil. 2.12) and “pursue holiness” (2 Cor. 7.1). What is your present strategy for doing this? Do you have someone to hold you accountable and encourage you in your effort? If you’d like to talk about this, send me an email at tmmoore@ailbe.org.

Week 2, Day 4

Do Not Go Beyond

Now these things, brethren I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 1 Corinthians 4.6

Sermon II

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“...except for those things that either Law or Prophets or Gospels or Apostles tell, there should be from others a profound silence on the Trinity. For only God’s witness is to be believed about God, that is about Himself, Who has furnished a witness either in the Law or Prophet or Gospel or Apostle, or in the Spirit to each spiritual man about Himself, through Himself or through an angel. But human argument or skill or any vainglorious philosophy, which is unsound even on the nature of the world, cannot be our teacher about God, but is to be regarded as sacrilegious and impious to God.”

In many generations of the Church theologians have allowed for the idea that God speaks to His preachers, as it were, alongside the Scriptures – whether by some immediate insight or even through an angel. Such insights may be valid, but we can be tempted to put too much stock in them. Even great theologians like Tertullian found the allure of such “immediate inspirations” appealing. But such insights are not new revelation; they do not add to the Scriptures, but only provide clarification or specific application. Columbanus insisted that his students not go beyond what is revealed in the Bible when teaching about God or His will, and that they not allow themselves to become beguiled by philosophical eloquence, but to test everything they heard against the revelation in Scripture.

Next Steps: With so many new books and so many websites discussing matters of faith and theology, pastors need a good discipline of checking everything they read or hear against the teaching of God’s Word. How do you practice this? How do you help your church leaders practice this?

Week 2, Day 5

The Inner Man

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father...that He would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man... Ephesians 3.14, 16

Sermon II

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“For of what use is the religion of the outward man, if there is not also shown an improvement in the inner? That person can be false and a thief, that person is false and a hypocrite, who displays one quality in his bearing and another in his character. Then let us not be like whited sepulchers, let us study to show ourselves splendid and adorned within and not without; for true religion resides in lowliness not of habit but of heart.”

In “bearing” a man might look like a true minister of the Word. But in “character” – in the inner man – he might be something completely other. This was a jab at the local preachers Columbanus and his students encountered as they worked in Gaul, where the faith had been long in decline. The

local ministers there were respected, relatively wealthy, and “dressed the part,” so to speak. But they were empty within, and Columbanus was not shy about confronting them or complaining to the Pope in Rome about their laxity. One can go through the motions of being a man of faith, and not be a man of faith at all. True piety begins within, and we must work hard to sustain it there always.

Next Steps: Celtic Christians practiced rigorous spiritual disciplines, throughout the day, to keep their souls in a state of humble revival. Is this a goal you strive for each day? How?

Week 2, Day 6

Cleanse Yourselves

For a bishop [Gr.: “overseer”] must be blameless, as a steward of God... Titus 1.7

Sermon II

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Then, lest perhaps we should labour without fruit, let us take pains to be freed from our vices by God’s help, that thereafter we can be adorned with virtues. Thus let us cleanse ourselves as far as we are able from every taint of vices, from pride first, from ill-will, from anger, from blasphemy, from injustice, from spite, from melancholy, from vain glory, from covetousness, from malice, from all bitterness; that we may be possessed by lowliness, gentleness, kindness, courtesy, sobriety, mercy justice, joy, and love.”

Repentance is not a teaching much in vogue from pulpits today. Consequently, repentance is not much practiced on the part of the people of God. Does this suggest that preachers don’t believe the people they serve need to repent of their sins? Or that they themselves should practice repentance on a daily basis? Inattention to repentance will breed complacency toward sin, and the presence of sin in any life or congregation can only obstruct the bearing of spiritual fruit and the practice of spiritual living (cf. Ps. 66.18). Preachers need to cleanse themselves and strive to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God, and to urge daily cleansing from sin by all those in their care.

Next Steps: What are the consequences of failing to practice repentance? What are the consequences of failing to preach repentance? Talk with your church leaders about how you might be more consistent in leading the people of God to embrace lives of repentance.

Week 2, Day 7

Holy by Performance

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. James 1.22

Sermon II

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“While we preach often we improve slowly; often are we offended, seldom patient, often conquered, seldom conquerors, often led astray, seldom wise. Then what will help us, like weak and unskilled fighters whose weapons turn and wound them, while it is no credit to hear these things, but to accomplish them? For the law does not make holy by hearing, but doubtless by performance; each

should honour the Lord, not simply by words and bodily toil, but by ripeness of character and purity of heart.”

Do we preach often and improve slowly? Do we ever see anything other than this? What a challenge! Pastors have the gift of words and the calling to preach, but we must never forget that the Word must first be working in us if it is ever to work powerfully through us (Col. 3.16). Thus the challenge to be always growing in the Lord – which we urge on the people we serve – must be the commanding challenge of our daily lives. Holiness increases in a congregation not merely by the hearing of the Word, but by the *faithful* hearing and doing of it, as Calvin insisted (*Institutes IV*).

Next Steps: What are some ways you might improve your own walk with the Lord and the nurture of your Christian character? How can church leaders work together to become a “holy team”? Talk with some of your leaders about this question.

For reflection or discussion

1. It’s obvious that Columbanus believed we need to ground all we do in ministry in the Word of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. How does this challenge affect your thinking about ministry?
2. Columbanus’ surviving sermons were preached, then written, to his “team” – the monks at the monasteries he left behind as he moved from Gaul to Switzerland and ultimately to northern Italy. He was always, it seems, concerned to be building his team. How does his example encourage or instruct you in building a leadership team?
3. What are some things that can lead pastors and church leaders to “think beyond” or “go beyond” the Word of God in their lives and ministries? How can we help one another resist this temptation?
4. Overseers (shepherds) are called to watch over the souls of those entrusted to their care. What is your approach to watching over the souls of those on your leadership team?
5. We must watch over our own souls first of all, as Paul exhorted Timothy (1 Tim. 4.16). What does this “self-watch” entail? How do you practice it?

Prayer:

Week 3, Day 1

The Best Thing in the World

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... Colossians 1.9, 10

Sermon III

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“What is the best thing in the world? To please its Creator. What is His will? To fulfill what He commanded, that is, to live rightly and dutifully to seek the Eternal; for duty and justice are the will of Him Who is dutiful and right. How do we reach this goal? By application. Then we must apply ourselves in duty and justice. What helps to maintain this practice? Understanding, which, while it winnows the remainder and finds nothing solid to rest in amongst those things which the world possesses, turns in wisdom to the one thing which is eternal.”

Ministers must continue to grow in their walk with the Lord, moving from understanding of God’s Word to those daily applications which please God and bless others. Our personal goal must be to increase in wisdom and knowledge, which is to increase in Jesus Christ. All our preaching and teaching is for the sake of others being able to grow in the Lord. But unless we also are growing, our labors on behalf of the people of God will not be as fervent or fruitful as they might be. A pastor’s own growth in the Lord must be his primary concern, for without this, we cannot expect our ministry’s to bear consistent and abounding fruit in those we serve.

Next Steps: How do you keep track of your own growth in the Lord? What areas in particular are you working on at this time?

Week 3, Day 2

What to Love

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 1 John 2.15

Sermon III

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“No other outward thing ought to be loved, according to the reckoning of truth, except eternity and the eternal will, which is inspired and quickened by the Eternal, Wonderful, Ineffable, Invisible, Incomprehensible, Who fills all things and passes beyond all things, Who is present and yet eludes our grasp. The wise man should love nothing here, since nothing lasts; for there eternal things are with the Eternal, here transitory things are with the mortal. Thus it is perilous to dwell amongst deceptions and deceits, and not to see the truths you ought to love...”

Love for God is the highest virtue and the highest calling of every believer. Everything in our lives should pale by comparison with the love we have for our Redeemer. However, too often we let love of temporal things and love of people put a damper on our love for God. Instead, if we can focus on

what we ought to love above all else, we'll find the grace to give thanks for life's good gifts and to bear up under the trials and struggles that come with seeking to grow the Church and make disciples.

Next Steps: How would you counsel a young person, just setting off for seminary, to keep love for God preeminent in all his daily concerns? Write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org, and I'll send you a Taxonomy for Loving God to guide your thinking and planning in this important area.

Week 3, Day 3

The Cost of Unending Joy and Pleasure

*You will show me the path of life;
In your presence is fullness of joy;
At your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16.11*

Sermon IV

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“All training [Latin: “discipline”], according to the Apostle, for the present seems to be a matter not of joy but of sorrow; nevertheless afterwards it yields a pleasant fruit and peaceful increase of reward to those who are exercised by it. For indeed what is learnt here without sorrow and toil, in the time of our very greatest stupidity and weakness? But if temporal sorts of training destroy the sweetness of present joy, what is to be hoped for from this training of our school? This in fact the training of all trainings, and at the price of present sorrow it prepares the pleasure of unending time and the delight of unending joy.”

We can sometimes give the impression that it should not be too hard to be a Christian, that following Christ should be a matter of what “comes naturally” rather than what we impose on our time and bodies to bend them toward obedience and transformation by God's grace. Everyone lives by disciplines of one kind or another. Most are unaware of the disciplines that are shaping their lives. Meanwhile, the disciplines that shape us for Christ-likeness go little or poorly used. If we do not train our people for disciplined lives, we will rob them of the joy of being in the presence of Christ and knowing the pleasure of His comfort and glory, here and now, and even perhaps then and there.

Next Steps: Is your own practice of spiritual disciplines yielding the regular reward of joy and pleasure in the presence of Christ and His glory? How might you improve this? Have a discussion with your leadership team about how to help one another improve in the practice of spiritual disciplines.

Week 3, Day 4

Ready for Toils?

For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. 1 Timothy 4.10

Sermon IV

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“But if, then, such and so many pains are borne untiringly for temporal and unsure rewards, what ought we to endure for eternal, true, and sure ones, whose conclusion is eternal? Is it not impossible for any polished accomplishment or exercise to be attained without training [Latin: “discipline”]? Or can training be acquired without bitterness? Therefore, since these things are so, let us make ready our mind, not for joy, not for security, as the Sage says, but for temptations and trials, for griefs and toils.”

Columbanus would have little patience with preaching that seeks merely to comfort and reassure believers, or to suggest that what God really wants for them is maximum peace and prosperity. These are to be ours, to be sure, but only in our Lord Jesus Christ. In this life we are called to struggle, fight the good fight, run the good race, lay down our lives, take up our crosses, and die to ourselves. It requires discipline to live this way, discipline that takes hold of our time and deliberately bends it, at every moment, to the service of Christ. Such living is painful stuff, but stuff which, in the enduring of it, yields that sense of Christ’s presence and power that make endurance a joy, perseverance a privilege, and trials and toils a reason to give thanks.

Next Steps: What are some of the trials that Christians should expect to encounter in this life? How are you equipping your people to bear up under and even to overcome these?

Week 3, Day 5

Never Separated

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8.38, 39

Sermon IV

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“For He created us to this end, that ever reigning with Him, we should praise Him unto ages of ages, and continually give thanks to Him. Therefore, knowing these things, under no toils, no trials let us fail, by no sorrows let us be conquered, by no wars fatigued, let us be moved from our place by no agonies of training, again let us be distracted by no blandishments, beguiled by no charms, and let us say as with the Apostle’s voice, ‘May no one and nothing separate us from the love of Christ...’”

One of the biggest challenges pastors face is connecting their people with Jesus with sufficient depth and consistency that they truly come to know that love of God that passes knowledge, and experience the reality of His steadfast love and faithfulness, caring for and guiding them throughout the day. This must be constantly in our focus and prayers as we work to equip the saints for ministry, for without this knowledge of the love of Christ, this first-hand and real experience of the risen Christ, all their exertions in His Name will be little more than merely superficial.

Next Steps: How can you tell when someone is connecting to Christ like this? How do you experience this kind of connectedness? How can this become a more conscious part of your disciple-making and team-building?

Week 3, Day 6

A Road, not a Dwelling

But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11.16

Sermon V

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“What then are you, human life? You are the roadway of mortals, not their life, beginning from sin, enduring up till death...So you are the way to life, not life; for you are a real way, but not an open one, long for some, short for others, broad for some, narrow for others, joyful for some, sad for others, for all alike hasting and irrevocable. A way is what you are, a way, but you are not manifest to all; for many see you, and few understand you to be a way...Thus you are to be questioned and not believed or warranted, traversed, but not occupied, wretched human life; for on a roadway none dwells but walks, that those who walk upon the way may dwell in their homeland.”

What kind of vision for the spiritual life do we cast for the people of God? Do we consistently point them beyond the daily grind to the greater, unseen realities of that heavenly landscape with which we are continually surrounded? Do we urge the saints on to a clearer vision and greater realization of those unseen things which are the North Star of our existence? We must not allow the people in our care to mistake this present life as the end towards which their faith is moving. It is a way, that's all. It can be a glorious way, whatever comes across our way, but only in the light of that City toward which we are journeying.

Next Steps: How do you nurture your own sense of spiritual vision? What difference does this make in your daily walk with the Lord?

Week 3, Day 7

Seek our True Home

*How lovely is Your tabernacle,
O LORD of hosts!*

*My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;*

My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. Psalm 84.1, 2

Sermon V

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Let us not seek upon the way what shall be in our homeland; for toil and weariness are appointed on the journey, rest and peace are made ready in the homeland. Therefore we must beware, lest perhaps we be careless on the way, and fail to reach our true home. For indeed there are not a few so careless on this journey, that they seem to be not so much on the way as in their home; and they travel unwillingly rather than freely towards a homeland that is certainly already lost.”

Does it seem to the people we serve that we are not so much on our way to our homeland, as already there? Are we too comfortable with this world, too nonchalant about our walk with the Lord, too quick to avoid conflict or trial for the sake of the Gospel? We run the risk of losing our eternal homeland if we allow ourselves to live in the present as though the present were most important.

Only as we keep our hearts and minds set on our true homeland will we be able to walk this temporal way as God intends.

Next Steps: What are you chiefly looking forward to at the end of your journey through this life? How are you preparing for that along the way? Talk with your church leaders about these questions.

For reflection or discussion

1. Vision and discipline played huge roles in the lives of Celtic Christian leaders like Columbanus. Where do they seem to have discovered the vision for their lives? How did this affect the way they disciplined their daily lives?
2. Meditate on Hebrews 11.1. Faith and assurance require a clear sense of “unseen things.” This was a major focus of Columbanus’ messages to his monks. How can a vision of unseen things help to build a stronger leadership team in a local church?
3. Columbanus insisted we must discipline our lives toward the vision God reveals in His Word. What are some obstacles that can keep the people of God today from taking up the disciplines necessary for pursuing a growing vision of unseen things?
4. What would you say are the most important disciplines a person needs to master in order to seek the Kingdom of God in all areas of life? In your ministry, how do you teach these disciplines to the people in your care?
5. Columbanus is merely one of great church leaders who used the image of a journey to describe the life of faith. What are some of the advantages to this image for the work of disciple-making?

Prayer:

Week 4, Day 1

Examine Yourself

Take heed to yourself and on the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. 1 Timothy 4.16

Sermon IX

Columbanus (ca 543-615)

“Wherefore let us know nothing more profitable for ourselves than to examine ourselves daily, every day of our life reviewing that dubious life, and keeping account of our words and thoughts, and shuddering at human life, to ponder without ceasing this aforesaid end of the roadway, that is our life, while we spurn the pleasures of the world.”

It’s a good idea to include in our regimen of spiritual disciplines some kind of ongoing self-watch, so that we are diligent in heeding Paul’s exhortation to make the best use of our time (Eph. 5.15-17). A workable self-watch will involve careful planning, waiting on the Lord in prayer, and being accountable to others for our lives and our ways. The pastor who will not practice a self-watch will be in danger, both personally and in his teaching, of straying from the way of the Lord or, at least, failing to realize as much of His fullness in life and ministry. And if he will not watch over even his own soul, how can he be expected to watch over the souls in his care (Heb. 13.17).

Next Steps: How do you practice a self-watch? Do you have people around you who are holding you accountable for your walk and your work? For a simple template to use in this discipline, write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org.

Week 4, Day 2

Live to Christ

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Galatians 2.20

Sermon X

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Thus let us live to Him Who while He dies for us is life; and let us die to ourselves that we may live to Christ; for we cannot live to Him unless first we die to ourselves, that is, to our wills. Let us be Christ’s and not our own; for we are not our own, for we are bought at a great price, and truly a great one, when the Lord is given for a slave, a King for a servant, and God for man.”

Living to Christ means that we live for His Kingdom, by His word, in His Spirit, and within His walk (1 Jn. 2.1-6). We seek the lost as He did (Lk. 19.10). We lay down our lives for the sheep (Jn. 10.15). We deny ourselves and take up the form of a servant in order to meet the needs of His flock (Phil. 2.5-11). We devote ourselves to building His Church (Matt. 16.18). We seek only the Father’s glory, and none of our own. We proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom and pray daily, “Nevertheless, not my will, but Yours, O God, be done.”

Next Steps: Are you living to Jesus? How can a church leadership team work together to make sure this is increasingly true of each one of them? Talk with your leaders about these questions.

Week 4, Day 3

Dying to Live

How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Romans 6.2

Sermon X

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“What ought we to render ourselves, if the Creator of the universe for us ungodly men, yet His creation, is unjustly put to death? Do you think you ought not to die to sin? Certainly you ought. Therefore let us die, let us die for the sake of life, since Life dies for the dead, so that we may be able to say with Paul, I live, yet not long I, but Christ lives in me...”

Again this past week my email tray was disturbed by the report of yet another pastor who has fallen into sinful behavior. Scandals created by pastoral leaders in recent years have made the Church an object of scorn among the lost and an excuse for the faithful to keep a low profile in their witness for Christ. God calls us to pursue holiness in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor. 7.1). The failure of pastors to take this call seriously is a primary reason for the Church’s increasing marginalization.

Next Steps: How do you guard yourself against the many temptations that assail pastors today? Are you pursuing holiness in the fear of God?

Week 4, Day 4

Pressing into the Kingdom

“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.” Luke 16.16

Sermon X

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Thence we now force the kingdom of heaven by strength and violence, and this we snatch somehow, as it were, from amidst our enemies’ hands in the middle of the field of strife, and as it were in the blood-stained soil of battle, while we are too hardly assailed not only by our foes but by ourselves, while each loves himself ill, and in the act of loving hurts himself; for he loves well who hates, that is, disciplines himself savingly; but he who makes terms with his foes is not said to love himself aright.”

Jesus described the true Kingdom-seeker as a “violent” person who takes the Kingdom “by force” (Matt. 11.12). Columbanus applied this to the disciplines we practice in order to subdue heart, mind, and conscience to Christ and to train the members of our bodies for godly living. The old self in us is set in its ways, and wants to persist in ruthless and destructive self-love. The Kingdom-dweller knows the destructive ways of the self, and bridles it with grace and truth that it may be serviceable to the Lord and others.

Next Steps: When was the last time you reviewed your practice of spiritual disciplines, to enhance or improve the disciplining of your soul? For a simple tool to assess your vision, disciplines, and the outcomes they yield, write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org.

Week 4, Day 5

The Image of Christ

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 3.18

Sermon XI

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Let us not be the painters of another’s image; for he is the painter of a despot’s image, who is fierce, wrathful, proud...For righteousness and unrighteousness, peace and disagreement are opposed to one another. Then lest perhaps we should import into ourselves despotic images, let Christ paint His image in us, as He does by saying, My peace I give you, My peace I leave to you. But what advantage is it for us to know that peace is good if it is not well preserved?”

Righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit – these are the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14.17). And they are its hallmarks for the simple reason that these reflect the very Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our King. As we pursue righteousness in the fear of the Lord, rest in the peace of Jesus that passes all understanding, and rejoice in the victory that is ours in Christ, He “paints” His own image on the canvas of our lives, and we show Jesus to the watching world.

Next Steps: In what specific ways have you observed growth in the image of Christ in your life over the past year? Talk about this question with your church leaders.

Week 4, Day 6

Love is No Trouble

Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13.10

Sermon XI

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“Love is no trouble; love is more pleasant, more healthful, more saving to the heart. For if the heart has not become enervated in its vices, love is its own health, besides being what is dear to God; yet nothing is dearer to God than love, especially spiritual love, since is it the sum of His law and of all His commands, according to that saying of the Apostle, But he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law.”

Paul reminds us that love is to the outcome we must seek from all our preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 1.5). It’s not enough for the people we serve to know sound doctrine or to feel as though their personal needs are being met by the ministry of the Word. We must fit them for love, and this should be no trouble, since it’s what the Lord is seeking, what the Spirit works to bring forth as fruit, what all men desire, and what we find to be the most fulfilling and satisfying way to live in relationship with others.

Next Steps: As you prepare to preach or teach, how do you remind yourself, and what do you do, in order to seek love as the outcome of instruction? Do the people you serve feel edified in love by your ministry? Why not ask a few of them?

Week 4, Day 7

Seek our True Home

As the deer pants for the water brooks,

So pants my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God? Psalm 42.1, 2

Sermon XIII

Columbanus (ca. 543-615)

“So still, my dearest brethren, give ear to our words, in the belief that you will hear something needful, and refresh the thirst of your mind from the streams of the divine fountain of which we now wish to speak, but do not quench that thirst, drink, but be not sated; for now the living Fountain, the Fountain of life, calls us to Himself, and says, Let Him that is athirst come unto Me and drink.”

Pastors sometimes complain to me that their people don't seem very hungry or thirsty for the things of the Lord. Sated on the junk food of getting-and-spending, generously ladled over with pop culture, God's people have little appetite for Christ or His Word. But what about us? Do our hunger and thirst for Christ make them long for the same? Do they see in us that earnest desire to be with the Lord that tells them they're missing something of great moment? Loving Christ is infectious. If our people see it in us, they'll want it for themselves, more than anything this world might offer.

Next Steps: Who makes you hungry and thirsty for more of the Lord? How can you be help to encourage your people to drink deeply of Him? Talk with your leadership team about these questions.

For reflection or discussion

1. As you read him, what seem to be the primary emphases of Columbanus' team-building sermons? How much of these emphases are part of your own team-building efforts?
2. Christ and His Kingdom – here and now as well as then and there – seem to have been the primary components of Columbanus' vision of the life of faith. How much a part of your own vision are these? What about the members of your leadership team?
3. Meditate on 1 Timothy 1.5. Love for God and neighbors must be the outcome we seek in all our teaching, preaching, and disciple-making. How can we tell when the people we serve are making progress in these goals?
4. What would you say is the most important lesson or insight you have gained from these sermons by Columbanus?
5. Is this insight significant enough to try to work it into your own life and ministry? How might you do that?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.