

♣ The Legacy of the True Historical Patrick

By Richard Bennett

Ireland has a very distinctive history. It was an island untouched by the Roman legions, and Patrick, the Evangelist, brought to it the Gospel of grace. Patrick was himself descended from a family that had been, for two generations at least, in Christ Jesus. His father, he tells us was “the deacon Calpurnius, son of the late Potitus, a presbyter, of the settlement of Bannaven Taburniae.”¹ These facts are recorded in Patrick’s own testimony of faith. This authentic document is preserved in five manuscripts: one in the *Book of Armagh* of the seventh century, the second in the Cotton Library of the tenth century, a third in the French monastery of St. Vedastus, and two more in the Cathedral Library of Salisbury. This authenticated document is the main source of both the person and the mission of Patrick, and also his clear statement of the Gospel of grace.

Patrick was born in the year 373² in a town on the River Clyde in Roman Britain, now a part of Scotland. When he was sixteen years old, Patrick was captured by a band of pirates who sold him to a chieftain in what is now county Antrim in Northern Ireland. For six years he tended flocks. In his testimony he tells us, “I was taken captive before I knew what I should desire and what I should shun.”³ It was during the time of his captivity that he turned from his careless ways and came to a saving knowledge of Christ Jesus. He was convicted that he was a sinner. In his own words,

“before I was humbled I was like a stone lying in deep mire, and He that is mighty came and in His mercy raised me up and, indeed, lifted me high up and placed me on top of the wall. And from there I ought to shout out in gratitude to the Lord for His great favours in this world and for ever, that the mind of man cannot measure.”⁴

Patrick, like so many of the godly men of history, found God’s favor in the riches of the grace of Christ. This was the theme echoing throughout the testimony of Patrick, in his own words “I am greatly God’s debtor, because he granted me so much grace.”⁵ He then grew in the grace of God. Having believed on “*the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,*”⁶ he directly received “*of his fullness...grace for grace.*”⁷ In his own words,

“More and more did the love of God, and my fear of Him and faith increase, and my spirit was moved so that in a day [I said] from one up to a hundred prayers, and in the night a like number; besides I used to stay out in the forests and on the mountain and I would wake up

¹ *The Confession of Patrick*, <http://irelandnow.com/legends/confession.html>, 1/29/03, p. 1.

² “According to the best authorities, Patrick was born about A.D. 373; and Lanigan has adduced good evidence to prove that he died in A.D. 465 (Apud Lanigan, vol. iv. p. 112). The *Book of Armagh* furnishes corroborative evidence of the same fact. It says, ‘From the passion of Christ to the death of Patrick there were 436 years.’ The crucifixion took place about A.D. 30; and adding these thirty years to the 436 that intervened between the crucifixion and the death of Patrick, we arrive at A.D. 466 as the year of his demise. Traditions of the highest authority attest that he spent sixty years in preaching the Gospel to the Scoto-Irish.” From, “St. Patrick: Apostle of Ireland” in *History of the Scottish Nation* by J.A. Wylie (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co. Andrew Elliot, Edinburgh 1886) Vol. II, Ch 9.

³ *The Confession of Patrick*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ John 1:14.

⁷ John 1:16.

before daylight to pray in the snow, in icy coldness, in rain, and I used to feel neither ill nor any slothfulness, because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning in me at that time.”⁸

Patrick relates how, after six years, he escaped and after a difficult journey on land and sea returned to his people in Scotland. In his own words, “I was again in Britain with my family [kinsfolk], and they welcomed me as a son, and asked me, in faith, that after the great tribulations I had endured I should not go anywhere else away from them.”⁹

His Direct Mission from the Lord

Like the Apostle Paul, he received a clear and personal call from the Lord to preach the Gospel in the land of his former captivity. He described his call in these words,

“I saw a man whose name was Victoricus coming as if from Ireland with innumerable letters, and he gave me one of them, and I read the beginning of the letter: ‘The Voice of the Irish’, and as I was reading the beginning of the letter I seemed at that moment to hear the voice of those who were beside the forest of Foclut which is near the western sea, and they were crying as if with one voice: ‘We beg you, holy youth, that you shall come and shall walk again among us.’ And I was stung intensely in my heart so that I could read no more, and thus I awoke. Thanks be to God, because after so many years the Lord bestowed on them according to their cry”¹⁰

He speaks of being called again in dream another night, but makes it clear how he interpreted what was happening by the Scriptures. He wrote, “*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we know not how to pray as we ought. But the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for utterance.*” And again, “The Lord our advocate intercedes for us.” Thus, Patrick relies on Scripture to understand his experience and to see that it was the Lord Himself who was calling him. In his own words, “He who gave his life for you, He it is who speaks within you.”¹¹ He understood that Christ Jesus, who had died for his sins, was the One who was calling him to work as an evangelist in the very island where he had been held captive.

A second historical document from Patrick’s own hand is his letter to Coroticus. In it he explains his assignment from God to a foreign nation for the glory of eternal life that is in Christ Jesus. His own words are the following, “Thus I am a servant in Christ to a foreign nation for the unspeakable glory of life everlasting which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹² This is a major factor in understanding Patrick. He knew himself as a sinner and found salvation where only sinners find it, “*in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”¹³ The first words of his testimony read, “I, Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible to many.” Likewise, in the beginning of his letter to Coroticus he states, “I, Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, resident in Ireland”. Quite clearly Patrick saw himself as a sinner. He did not look to some spark of life from within himself or to some ritual; rather, he looked unto Christ Jesus. Patrick’s words, “unspeakable glory of life everlasting which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” shows his distinct and personal comfort and courage in Christ. Totally unlike religion that looks to rituals, Patrick had his eyes set on the Lord. Catholicism now, and to some extent even in Patrick’s

⁸ *The Confession of Patrick*, p. 2.

⁹ *The Confession of Patrick*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² *Letter to Coroticus*, http://prayerfoundation.org/st_patricks_letter_to_coroticus.htm 1/30/03, p. 2.

¹³ “...that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith..” Philippians 3:8-9

time, looks to sacraments as necessary for salvation.¹⁴ Patrick saw himself only as a sinner saved by grace in Christ Jesus. Patrick's message is that salvation is totally in Christ alone--a message utterly diverse from that of Roman Catholicism then and now.

His Mission Begins

Patrick, the Christian Evangelist, being about 30 years old and together with some brothers in the Lord, set out for Ireland. He arrived in or about the year 405. This fact of history is authentic and verified. For example, Marcus, an Irish Bishop, who lived at the beginning of the ninth century, states that Patrick came to Ireland in the year 405 AD and Nennius, who lived about the same time, repeats the statement.¹⁵ This date is of great importance because many centuries later there was an attempt made to confuse Patrick with Palladius, who had been sent out by Pope Celestine as a missionary to Ireland. When news of Patrick's Christian success had reached Rome, Pope Celestine then sent Palladius as a bishop to bring the churches under the control of the Papacy. It was in 432, at least 27 years after Patrick's commission from God, that Palladius from Rome came on the scene. When Palladius did come to Ireland, it was to an Ireland that had many Christian churches and that did not accept his message of subservience to the Bishop of Rome. In actual fact, Palladius was greatly discouraged by his lack of success. To quote from the historian Philip Schaff, "Palladius was so discouraged that he soon abandoned the field, with his assistants, for north Britain, where he died among the Picts....The Roman mission of Palladius failed; the independent mission of Patrick succeeded. He is the true Apostle of Ireland, and has impressed his memory in indelible characters upon the Irish race at home and abroad."¹⁶

God's Grace over the Course of 60 Years

The work of Patrick and his associates in Ireland was extremely difficult. He came up against the old pagan religion of the Druids. The people believed in the Druids as pagan priests who mediated for them in the things of the spirit. When Patrick preached Christ Jesus in his own words he said,

"I am greatly God's debtor, because he granted me so much grace, that through me many people would be reborn in God, and soon after confirmed, that clergy would be ordained everywhere for them, and the masses lately come to belief, whom the Lord drew from the ends of the earth. As He once promised through His prophets: 'To you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Our fathers have inherited naught but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit.' And again, '*I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the uttermost ends of the earth.*' And I wish to wait then for His promise which is never unfulfilled, just as it is promised in the Gospel."¹⁷

He wrote of baptizing many thousands of believers after they had professed faith.¹⁸

¹⁴ "The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*." (italic in the original). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second ed., (United States Catholic Conference, 1997) Para. 1129.

¹⁵ The historian, J A Wylie goes to great lengths to demonstrate the fact that Patrick came to Ireland to evangelize in 405. Among others, he quotes Dr. Killen as saying "'Its [i.e., this fact] claims to have been acknowledged by the best critics of all denominations,' by Usher, Ware, Tillemont, Lanigan, and Neander....He [Dr. Killen] thinks that Patrick arrived in Ireland immediately after the death of Nial, or Nial of the Nine Hostages, in the year 405.'" From "St Patrick: Apostle of Ireland" by J.A. Wylie in *History of the Scottish Nation*, Vol. II, Ch. 13, endnote No. 4.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 4, Ch. 2, Sect. 14, "The Conversion of Ireland".

¹⁷ *The Confession of Patrick*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

He also wrote about anxious journeys, difficulties, and disappointments. He combated the powers of darkness in the priesthood of the Druids. He relied on Christ Jesus and the glorious Holy Spirit given to convict people of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. He understood grace to be entirely from God when he declared,

“I, alone, can do nothing unless He Himself vouchsafes it to me. But let Him search my heart and [my] nature, for I crave enough for it, even too much, and I am ready for Him to grant me that I drink of His chalice, as He has granted to others who love him. Therefore may it never befall me to be separated by my God from His people whom He has won in this most remote land. I pray God that He gives me perseverance, and that He will deign that I should be a faithful witness for His sake right up to the time of my passing.”¹⁹

Over the course of 60 years, Patrick went the length and breadth of Ireland preaching the Gospel and, like Timothy and Titus before him, he ordained elders and established churches. It is reckoned that at the end of his days there were 365 churches across the island. These were established, as were the churches in Biblical times, with the people served by a pastor or elder. The authority of the pastor was one of service, rather than lording it over the people. It was like that which was established in the pages of Scripture. Likewise, the monasteries set up by Patrick, were totally unlike the monasteries that were established under the Church of Rome. These monasteries were quite like those of the Vaudois and other early Christian churches of northern Italy and southern France, whereby men came aside for some years to be trained in the Scriptures and to learn how to evangelize and to bring the Gospel to others. Later in their lives these men married and had families. These men were not forsaking the world for some retreat of inner holiness; rather, they were men who saw light and life in Christ Jesus and wished to evangelize others with the true Gospel. Because of these monasteries and the churches that Patrick founded in Ireland, Ireland became known as the “Isle of Saints and Scholars”.

600 years of Fruitfulness

The clarity of the Gospel message cherished by Patrick and those who worked with him was to live on for many years after him. There were many famous missionaries like Patrick such as Columba and his companions who set out for Scotland in 563. Then there was Columbanus with his companions that went to evangelize France and Germany in 612. Kilian and the brothers that accompanied him went as missionaries to Franconia and Wurzburg in 680. Forannan and twelve brothers with him set out to bring the Gospel to the Belgian frontier in 970.²⁰

For more than six hundred years, Irish missionaries carried the Gospel with the same truthfulness as Patrick’s to Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy and beyond. Darkness covered Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Dark Ages had begun and the Roman Church, having gained rulership through intrigue and persecution, now held most of Europe in her iron grip. Even so, in those dark centuries, the Irish missionaries continued to spread the true Gospel, seed which for centuries to come would bear much good fruit all across Europe.

¹⁹ Ibid p 8

²⁰ For a more complete list, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 4, Ch. 2, “Conversion of Northern and Western Barbarians”, Sect. 15, “The Irish Church after St. Patrick. The Missionary Period”.

Embezzlement of the Legacy of Patrick

With the coming of the Danes in the ninth century, however, the Celtic Church in Ireland began to lose its Biblical clarity. Further, Papal Rome began to unleash military power to bring Ireland under her control. This began with the decree of Pope Adrian IV issued to King Henry II of England in 1155. The Pope authorized the invasion of Ireland and sent the king a ring of investiture as Lord of Ireland, calling upon the monarch to, “to extirpate the vices that have there taken root, [in Ireland]...saving to St. Peter and the holy Roman Church the annual pension of one penny from each house.”²¹

King Henry carried out the designs of the Papacy in 1171 and with a strong military force subdued the whole Irish nation. He received from every Archbishop and Bishop, at the Synod of Cashel in 1172 charters whereby they confirmed the Kingdom of Ireland to him and his heirs. The King sent a transcript of these charters to Pope Alexander III, who, according to the letters of the Archbishops and Bishops, was extremely gratified by the extension of his dominion, and in 1172 issued a bull confirming the Papal decree of Pope Adrian. Further rulings were sent from Rome to Henry II and to the princes and nobles of Ireland, and to the bishops of Ireland to establish the hierarchy over the people and pastors and enjoin obedience of both Ireland and England to the Papal throne.

The Heritage of Patrick Lives On!

The heartbeat and the soul of Patrick was the Gospel of Christ. He wrote in his testimony,

“I am imperfect in many things, nevertheless, I want my brethren and kinsfolk to know my nature so that they may be able to perceive my soul’s desire. I am not ignorant of what is said of my Lord in the Psalm: ‘You destroy those who speak a lie and a lying mouth deals death to the soul.’ Likewise the Lord says in the Gospel, ‘In the day of judgment, men shall render an account for every idle word they utter’” So it is that I should fear mightily, with terror and trembling, this judgment on the day when no one shall be able to steal away or hide, but each one shall render account for even our smallest sins before the judgment seat of Christ.”²²

These words of Patrick are as a prophetic trumpet of the Lord. It is most serious to steal the legacy from the people of the nation, particularly when that heritage was life and light in Christ Jesus! Many Irish have grown up engrossed in the rites and rituals of Roman Catholicism. Many of us, turning from those dead things and having drunk deeply of the Biblical grace of God that is in Christ Jesus, now want to stand on Patrick’s words, “no one shall be able to steal away or hide, but each one shall render account for even our smallest sins before the judgment seat of Christ.” To publish abroad the Gospel of God’s chosen in Christ “*before the foundation of the world*”²³ is our longing now, as it was Patrick’s then. The wonder of Patrick’s life was simply God’s grace in Christ Jesus. The divine call to the true Gospel went forth from Ireland for more than 600 years. Just as Patrick expected the power of God’s grace to overcome the priesthood of the Druids, we now stand for the same Biblical Gospel that he preached to evangelize even those

²¹ The full text of the Papal Bull of Pope Adrian IV that empowered king Henry II to conquer and subdue Christian churches to Rome can be read at: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/bullad.htm> 2/1/2003

²² *The Confession of Patrick*, p. 8.

²³ Ephesians 1:4

in the Catholic priesthood and hierarchy. The battle is the Lord's and the victory will be His. *"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*²⁴ In the legacy of Patrick, we pray Christ words, *"Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am."*²⁵ The frightening words of the Lord ring in the ears of those who spend their lives in man-made religion, *"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."*²⁶ No person by merely acknowledging Christ through a priesthood and sacraments shall have any part with God in Him, but only the one who does the will of His Father. The Lord made the will of the Father abundantly clear when He said, *"this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."*²⁷ *"Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts...."*²⁸ As Christ Jesus' Gospel stands, so also is His call on your life. *"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."*²⁹ Believe on Him alone for, *"this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."*³⁰ Then you will stand where before you Patrick stood immovable, and this is how it will be for all eternity. *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new."*³¹ *"Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."* ♣

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²⁴ Luke 12:32

²⁵ John 17:24

²⁶ Matthew 7:21

²⁷ John 6:29

²⁸ Hebrews 3:7, 8

²⁹ Romans 10:17

³⁰ I John 5:11-12

³¹ II Corinthians 5:17