

THE PATRICK OPTION: CELTIC EVANGELISM FOR
CONTEMPORARY WITNESS AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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There is much myth and lore surrounding the patron saint of Ireland. He is accredited with forever banishing snakes from the island, raising people from the dead, and caused corpses to talk! He even used miracles to in a Mt. Carmelesque showdown in order to persuade tribal kings to come to faith¹ that surely would have impressed Elijah. In reality Patrick needed none of the folklore attributed to him, because God performed a mighty miracle of salvation on that island through His humble and faithful servant, Patrick. Before Patrick's arrival as bishop to Ireland there were very few Christians among Celts and when he left, there were thousands of Christians worshiping in hundreds of churches.²

So what was Patrick of Ireland's secret? What church planting and evangelism methodology did he use? These questions are mostly rhetorical in order to guard from a default pragmatic evaluation of Patrick's success, but I think there is something to learn from Patrick as we operate in an increasingly post-Christian western culture. Volumes have been written making assumptions and assertions on the how and why Patrick was successful, but in reality very little is known. Patrick is only known for two written works³: *The Epistle To The Soldiers of Coroticus* (Epistola forward) and *Confession* (Confessio forward)⁴. Scholars are split on which was written

¹ Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 88-9.

² George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 10th anniversary rev. and expanded ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 11.

³ The English translations of passages from Epistola and Confessio will be taken from: Maire De Paor et al., *Patrick the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland : St Patrick's Confessio and Epistola* (Dublin: Veritas, 1998), 213-96.

⁴ Direct references to these works will be E or C with line numbers in parenthesis.

first,⁵ more recent theories tend to believe that *Epistola* was written first⁶. It is the purpose of this paper to look at the writings of Patrick and set them next to the historical context of Patrick's personal spiritual journey and the resulting success of Patrick's mission in Ireland and see what, if anything, can be learned in our postmodern and increasingly post-Christian context.

Patrick's Historical Context

Britain was governed under the Roman Empire in the 5th century, but due to the influx of Saxons, the Empire was beginning to weaken (ultimately as Rome is sacked in 410 A.D.), disrupting the continuity of geo-political structures in Britain⁷. Theodosius was likely the Emperor (347-395 A.D.) when Patrick was born.⁸ It should also be noted that Patrick was also a contemporary of Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius (who was Britain born) and the Augustine and Pelagius controversy causes some to make assertions regarding the Theology of Patrick given his British roots. Similarly, it should be noted there is absolutely no evidence that Patrick had any contact with either Augustine or Pelagius – or even read their work for that matter.

Ireland was just outside the reach of the Roman Empire and her inhabitants were considered to be crude and uncivilized (non-Latin speaking) barbarians driven by their emotions. In fact, the way they approached warfare was unsettling even to Roman soldiers⁹. Not only were they not “sophisticated” like the Roman world, they were rumored to be incestuous and

⁵ Richard Patrick Crosland Bishop of Clogher Hanson, *Saint Patrick. His Origins And Career* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 106.

⁶ De Paor et al., *Patrick the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland : St Patrick's Confessio and Epistola*, 167.

⁷ Ciarán Loughran, “Early Irish Exegesis: Patrick as Orthodox and Novel” (Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 8.

⁸ Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography*, 2.

⁹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 7.

cannibalistic¹⁰ and therefore lacked the capacity for understanding the Gospel, but in reality to the Roman world all who are outside of the Empire were considered “barbarians”.¹¹

Patrick’s Life

This section will provide a very brief narrative of the life of Patrick of Ireland. I would commend Freeman’s biography¹² for a very enjoyable and informative perspective on the life of Patrick. Other more technical but very helpful works would be by Hanson¹³ and De Poar¹⁴. It is outside the scope and purpose of this paper to discuss the alternative viewpoints such as dates (such as Patrick’s birth and death) and specific places (such as where he was reared in Britain and where he was held in captivity, etc.) as these things are speculative. It is only necessary for the purposes of this paper that these things happened in history and are generally and adequately accounted for in Patrick’s writings.

Patrick was born in Britain and, as with many of the details of his life, the specific date is unknown. It’s assumed that he was born around the closing of the 4th century into the aristocracy of England. His father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest in the Church¹⁵. While he was baptized in the church and knew the catechism, he had little regard for Christ or His Bride and was a bit of a trouble-maker¹⁶. Apparently, by his own confession, he committed a grievous sin when he was fifteen years old. The particulars of the sin are not known, but it was made public late in life and caused trouble at the end of his ministry.

¹⁰ Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography*, 20-2.

¹¹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 6.

¹² Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography*.

¹³ Hanson, *Saint Patrick. His Origins And Career*.

¹⁴ De Paor et al., *Patrick the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland : St Patrick's Confessio and Epistola*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁶ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 1.

At the age of about sixteen, Patrick was kidnapped by Celtic pirates and taken to Ireland and sold into slavery, along with many other Brits. He spent six years as a slave mostly herding cattle and sheep. As he suffered and labored, he remembered the faith of his fathers and of his youth and began to earnestly pray that God meet him. Patrick recounts in *Confessio* that the more he prayed, the nearer God seemed and that one day he prayed 100 times during the day and again at night resulting in God meeting him. God warmed his heart to the point that he was no longer bothered by the winter elements¹⁷. He goes on to write that God revealed to him that he was providing an avenue of escape by ship. Sure enough a boat was waiting and the crew reluctantly brought him aboard and they sailed for home.

Most Christians can look back on hard times in their lives, where in retrospect they can see that the hardship – even calamity that God may allow - is used for His glory and for our good. The “good” of course is not the calamity itself, but the work of spiritual formation in our lives – the conformation to the image of the Son (Romans 8:28-29). Patrick knew this to be true as well. Freeman credits Patrick with the following:

God used the time [of enslavement] to shape and mold me into something better. He made me into what I am now – someone very different from what I once was, someone who can care about others and work to help them. Before I was a slave, I didn’t even care about myself.¹⁸

After his escape, Patrick was reunited with his family, but not for long. The same God that gave Patrick new life asked him to die to himself and return to the island of his imprisonment. After being trained, Patrick accepted an appointment as Bishop of Ireland and spent the rest of his days ministering to the people of the country that enslaved him.

The results were staggering. Likely tens of thousands were baptized. Dozens of priests were ordained. More than 55 (actually possibly hundreds) churches were planted and at least 30-40 of the 150 tribal kingdoms were predominantly Christian by the time Patrick’s time

¹⁷ De Paor et al., *Patrick the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland : St Patrick's Confessio and Epistola*.

¹⁸ Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography*, 29.

was done¹⁹. Today more than 84% of all Irish people identify with the Christian faith²⁰ and the tradition goes back to Patrick the former Irish slave.

As an old man, Patrick wrote the letter *Confessio* to answer charges of a grave sin from when he was 15 years old. We don't know what that sin was, only that it must have been severe, singular in occurrence (as it happened "within an hour") and that it happened in his youth. Before Patrick became bishop he confessed it to a friend to clear his conscience. That friend spilled the beans many years later. We don't know the sin, but Patrick never denies the seriousness of it. But he refuses to leave Ireland because he is certain he would not be allowed to return²¹. His self defense in *Confessio* gives a great picture of a man who loves God and the people in his charge.

Patrick's Characteristics

This section will deal with some of Patrick's characteristics that I see as directly attributing to his success in Ireland. Again, these perspectives are taken from what I think we know for sure about Patrick and his work through his writing. Many of these characteristics will flow into an informed assumption about the evangelistic method he may have used because you get a picture of the heart of the man who cared deeply for the spiritual condition of these "pagans".

Obedience

First and foremost, you have to attribute Patrick's faithful obedience as something God used in order to bring the Gospel to Ireland. Patrick could have done great things for the Kingdom in Britain, but he heeded the call to go and God was pleased to use Patrick turn hearts away from pagan idols and draw them to Himself. One can only imagine how difficult it must

¹⁹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 11.

²⁰ 2011 Census Data: Christianity in Ireland: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Ireland

²¹ Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland : A Biography*, 13-5; 142.

have been for Patrick to make this decision. His memory of Ireland must not have been a good one, except for his salvation. In addition, Patrick speaks of the heartache of leaving his family and kinsman and that his family offered “gifts” and “tears” to persuade him to stay and his elders and donors were “offended”. Patrick was determined,

“...but, with God as my pilot, in no way did I consent nor acquiesce, not by my grace but God who conquers in me, and I stood firm against them all so that I might come to the Irish pagans to proclaim the Gospel” (C, 37)

Love

Patrick’s love for the God who saved him compelled him to go back to Ireland to once again be a slave – only this time as a slave to Christ. How else can you explain that a man would leave the comforts of his home after escaping being a slave for six years? His love for Christ caused him to love his former captors – and the slaves serving them. This was likely a motivation for Patrick as he was likely the first European leaders to publicly speak out against slavery. Either within Patrick’s lifetime or shortly after his death – Patrick as a slave to Christ – brought about the end of the slave trade in Ireland!²²

This love Patrick had for the people of Ireland was also ferocious. His first written work is likely *Epistola* which is letter written to the soldiers of the Roman commander Coroticus who ordered his soldiers to raid, murder and enslave many of Patrick’s newly baptized Christians. This was a horrific scene and stirred Patrick to understandable righteous anger. This letter was sent under Patrick’s authority as bishop as a notice of excommunication. Patrick’s anger and heartache is unmistakable as he is “compelled by the zeal of God and the truth of Christ roused me up for love of my nearest neighbors and children” (E, 1). The words of this letter demand justice and repentance and the heart of a loving pastor comes through loud and clear.

²² Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 11-2.

In Patrick, we see a clear demonstration for his love for his brother. Patrick sought to care for and share the Gospel with tribal kings (which carried favor with those in power) and with the marginalized (mainly slaves and women). In either case, the motivation was love - love for His God and love for the Irish, because he was “very much God’s debtor, who has granted me such grace” (C, 38) and he because God cared for these “barbarians and pagans” (E, 1)

Humility

Even when Patrick asserts his authority as bishop (as seen in *Epistola*), he does so with humility. He begins *Epistola*, “I, Patrick, a sinner, manifestly untaught, established in Ireland, profess that I am a bishop” (E, 1). He wants the recipients of the letter to see that he has the authority of the church to excommunicate, but it’s prefaced with humility. *Confessio* begins in a similar fashion: “I, Patrick, a sinner, very rustic and the least of all the faithful and very contemptible in estimation of most people” (C, 1). This theme of humility proceeds through the remainder of the work. His humility was his approach to his office as bishop. He acted more like a local pastor and condescended to the people in order to meet needs. He became an Irishman²³. In short, he humbled himself in love out of obedience to God for the sake of the barbarian people that enslaved him. He was once a slave of the Irish; then he became a slave to Christ in order to be used to make the people of his masters his brothers.

Credibility

Patrick was uniquely equipped to minister to the Celts because he as familiar with them and their way of life. Also, as discussed above, because he humbled himself in love out of obedience to God for the sake of the barbarian people that enslaved him, it likely didn’t take long for the Irish to accept his call for friendship. This was undoubtedly alarming for the Irish that first encountered the return of Patrick. They likely would have expected rage, wrath and

²³ Ibid.

vengeance. Instead they got humility, love, patience and generosity. Patrick was showing this passionate and expressive people a new way. His response no doubt earned a cautious audience. As time wore on, Patrick earned trust, even with the unconverted because they knew he would not plunder them. He wrote appealing to his superiors regarding his credibility and conduct, “You know, God also, how I have lived among you from my youth in purity of faith and in sincerity of heart. Even these pagans among whom I dwell I have kept and I will keep my word to them. God knows I have not taken advantage of any of them, nor do I think of doing so, on account of God and His church” (C, 48).

Theology

Ciarán Loughran²⁴ does a more than ample job of describing Patrick’s theology and I agree with him it is orthodox and I commend his thesis as an excellent summary of Patrick’s orthodoxy. The point I will mention deals with the Augustine/Pelagius controversy.

It’s worth noting that most of the historical and biographical sources I read about Patrick associate him with Pelagian or semi-Pelagian theology. I will be the first to admit that I am not a Patrician scholar, but to read the *Epistola* and *Confessio* and draw an association with Pelagius is tenuous. Patrick’s view of anthropology sounds more Augustinian (although that is not expressed either) as well as his Hamartiology. Patrick speaks of the Lord “opening my heart to my unbelief so that at last I might remember my sins” and how God preserved him in his youth and kept watch over him while he couldn’t distinguish between good and evil (C, 2). This does not sound like Pelagian theology at all. The Pelagian assertions are made, in contrast to Augustine, in that Patrick saw the good in people as opposed to depravity. Hunter makes this point a couple of times and quotes Cahill in the process.²⁵ Finney notes it is impossible to not

²⁴ Loughran, “Early Irish Exegesis: Patrick as Orthodox and Novel”.

²⁵ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 70, 85.

note the backdrop of the controversy during this period.²⁶ This theological leap is unnecessary and honestly discrediting to the otherwise helpful work done by Hunter, Finney and Cahill. I'd pose the question: Is it not possible that Patrick understands depravity by experience (after all it's entirely possible that Patrick never even read either Augustine or Pelagius) and after experiencing the grace of God he wants these people to come to Christ as he has? As a means to that end, he is showing them a new way through an embodied witness? In Patrick's mind, no one understood sin and forgiveness better than he did. Could this simply have been the motivation to reach the lost in Ireland? This observation is at best tangential to my argument, but it was an aspect to my research that puzzled me, so I thought it worth noting. Especially in that the argument is unnecessarily off-putting to those who hold an orthodox Augustinian perspective on these key theological issues.

Patrick's Method

I think Patrick's model can be described as pragmatic and patient. It's pragmatic in that he sought out the tribal kings, even going so far as to offer them bribes in order to plan a church in their kingdom. This way he was assured the opportunity to work "legally" in the kingdom and he was planting monastic communities and churches in an organized way that also was close enough to the seat of power that provided at least notable credibility that the king doesn't mind that he's there and at best a real opportunity to lead a king to Christ.

Patrick was also patient. He knew these people well. He knew that if he came in with a Roman way of evangelism, he would get run out, re-enslaved or he'd perish. Once appointed to bishop, he came to the island with a team and started out with a monastic community for the priests and clergy that accompanied him. They were set on learning the rhythms of the people and the Celtic culture. Patrick and his team were determined to show them a better way, but a

²⁶ John Finney, *Recovering the Past* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), 123.

way that they could identify with. They didn't try to "civilize" these barbarians, but rather live in their space, learn their rhythms and earn the right to join them in life.

The Celts were a passionate people that appreciated creation. They lived off the land, so they respected their resources. They sought to appease their distant, ghostly druid gods. Human sacrifice was an aspect of this polytheistic religion. They erected huge standing stones to commemorate worship. They incorporated singing and chanting into their rituals. The number three (triad) in their ceremonies and riddles fascinated them. Also, they were very comfortable with the concept of paradox²⁷. These aspects of worship and thought were no doubt entry points into Christian theology and practice: Blood sacrifice for atonement, standing stones were converted to Celtic Crosses emblazoned with the Christian Chi Rho, chanting became *lectio divina* (contemplative prayer), Trinitarian theology resonated with them and paradoxes such as loving your enemy and believing in Christ requires one to die to self and have eternal life made sense to them.

Patrick understood the need and the urgency to proclaim the Gospel and to preach the Good News (C, 40); however Patrick also understood that he and his team had to earn the right to be heard. We have already discussed aspects of Patrick's character that likely helped him gain entry into the lives of the Irish, but his method was likely to abandon the Roman way of evangelism which is believing comes before belonging. Patrick, according to John Finney (aptly summarized by Hunter²⁸), practiced "belonging before believing". The Roman way of evangelism (which is similar to the primary American model) was Presentation → Decision → Fellowship. The Celtic Way of Evangelism was Fellowship → Ministry and Conversation → Belief and Invitation to Commitment.

Monastic communities would live lives based on rhythm incorporating things like solitary disciplines (praying and meditation), spending time with your soul friend, work and play

²⁷ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism : How Christianity Can Reach the West - Again*, 76-77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-4.

in your community and practicing hospitality and care of neighbors. This would be attractive to people watching and the community would invite visitors in and love them and care for them. It took patience to embody the Christian life for the people of Ireland, but after a time, these pagan druids would begin to set aside their satanic worship for a better way – a way that appealed to the marginalized and the oppressed. This embodied and rhythmic way of life was attractive and not threatening to the Irish. God glorified Himself through Patrick’s patience and faithfulness as lives on the island began to change. “The Irish slave trade came to a halt and other forms of violence such as murder and inter-tribal warfare decreased and [Patrick’s] communities modeled the Christian way of faithfulness, generosity and peace to all the Irish.”²⁹

Even though it cannot be proven that Patrick the “Breastplate” attributed to him, the beauty of that prayer/song demonstrates how Patrick must have encouraged the artistry of song and poetry that continued through the centuries in Christianity in the Celtic world.

Patrick’s Example for a Postmodern Culture

Patrick’s level of monasticism resembles Benedict in function although he predates Benedict by half a century or more. This function can be lived out in a way that is helpful in today’s context without living as a monk.

We need to be very intentional about our own preparation and Spiritual Formation. Patrick and his team trained before venturing to Ireland. They also lived together under one-another’s spiritual director helping each other be conformed to the image of the Son. We do this so that we are blessed, but in order to bless others. Our spiritual formation isn’t for our own sake but for the sake of those the Lord will put in our paths. Let’s revisit the quote attributed to Patrick by Freeman in that before he was a slave, he didn’t even care about himself (let alone anyone else). This is the power of Holy Spirit in conformation of us into the image of the Son in giving us the capacity to care for others – even against our own “best interest”.

²⁹ Ibid., 11-2.

We can be sensitive to the community in which we live inviting others to join with us. Take spiritual responsibility of our street, taking an active interest in what is important to our neighbors, meeting their needs, laugh and cry with them. In doing so maybe we can earn the relational right to share a new and better way with them. Let them belong before expecting them to believe. Besides, that takes the pressure off of convincing them to believe, since that is God's job anyway.

Issues such as racial bigotry, hatred, idolatry, injustice and other social issues are the Coroticus of our time. They invade our communities with the intention to murder and divide. As Christians, we see our responsibility to be the ones to help bind wounds, weep and mourn for the wounded, speak prophetically to power and live in a way that scripture teaches. Doing so the Spirit will provide the opportunity to lovingly tell our neighbors there is a better Way. Let me tell you about Him.

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