

# **PATRICK:**

## **The Irish Apostle**

**He quoted none of the church fathers  
and never mentions any of the canons of the church councils  
His Christianity was uniquely apostolic**

**by Warren C. Trenchard**

Among the world's most widely celebrated national heroes, St. Patrick of Ireland must be rated near the top. Yet his life is hidden in obscurity. He is as universally associated with Ireland as are the shamrock and the shillelagh, but practically nothing is known about the essential details of his life. Scholars hold a wide range of opinions about him.

Some have romanticized his career and colored his teachings far beyond the evidence of the facts, while others have denied his very existence. The truth must lie somewhere between these extremes. Let us consider what we do know about Patrick from writings that are generally accepted as his own, and from other apparently authentic material. (1)

### **Early Life**

Patrick was born about A.D. 388 (2) somewhere in Britain. (3) No one knows where exactly - except that it was not in Ireland! Probably England and Wales. According to Patrick, his father was a provincial landholder, suggesting a comfortable, though not wealthy, background. Furthermore, his father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest, though Patrick himself was evidently not a practicing Christian while a youth at home. He characterized himself during this time as being "ignorant of God." (4)

When he was 16 years old, Patrick was captured by a band of raiders and, with others, carried off to Ireland. There, as a slave, he tended sheep for six years. Apparently his early Christian training, unproductive at first, became the foundation for his zealous quest for salvation during this difficult period. He later recalled the experience in these words, "More and more the love and fear of God burned, and my faith and my spirit were strengthened."

Patrick had many dreams that affected his life. While still a slave he dreamed that he should attempt to escape from his Irish master. He acted accordingly and found a ship captain who took him to France. After several years of unknown activities, he returned to his family in Britain. There he had his most important dream. He saw a man from Ireland named Victoricus who gave him some letters. As he read one entitled "The Voice of Ireland" he heard voices crying. "We beseech thee, holy youth, to come and walk with us once more." (5) To this experience Patrick attributed the origin of his mission to Ireland.

## **The Apostle to Ireland**

We have little certain information concerning the details of Patrick's Irish mission. It commenced about 415. He described his work to win village chieftains to Christ and through them to influence their people. Evidently he was consecrated as a bishop by his home clerics. In Ireland he established churches and appointed bishops to oversee them. Despite some exaggerated accounts, his work, while successful, did not achieve spectacular proportions.

Patrick was not the first Christian in Ireland. He appears to have found some Christian priests already there when he arrived. They pledged him their congregations. Before this time Pope Celestine (d. 432) had sent the bishop Palladius to Ireland. His mission had met with little success and ended after a year. Palladius reported that he had found the Irish already believing in Christ but unwilling to support the Roman type of Christianity.

After a long ministry that influenced not only their religious but also their social and legal history, Patrick, the apostle to the Irish, died about 460. (6) He was followed by a succession of Irish Christian leaders who, for several centuries, preserved his distinctive type of Christianity.

Patrick has been called "father of teaching and faith for Irishmen." He himself recognized his responsibility to guide the formulation of Christian teaching. He declared, "According to the role of faith in the Trinity, I should define doctrine, and make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation, without being held back by danger, and spread everywhere the name of God without fear, confidently."

## **Bible, Not the Fathers**

Regarding his doctrine of authority, Patrick leaves no doubt. "The words are not mine, but of God and the apostles and prophets, who have never lied." This was not just a theory, for his writings, though few and short, are soaked with the dew of biblical language. In abrupt contrast, he never quotes the teachings of the fathers, and he never mentions the canons of the church councils.

## **The Trinity**

Patrick believed in a triune God. He taught that Christ "above existed with the Father" and was "begotten before the beginning of anything." He saw Christ as man's mediator with God - a role he nowhere assigns to angel, saint, or priest. In this silence he is followed by Irish Christians for three centuries after him. For Patrick, the Holy Spirit was divine, being given by Christ to the believers as a first installment of salvation. He believed that the Spirit dwelt in his heart and had changed his life. In Patrick's view, God was the origin of all things. His successors show clear evidence of their literal acceptance of the Genesis account of creation.

## **The Nature of Humans**

Patrick's view of man does not appear to include a radical dualism between an evil, temporal body and a good, eternal soul. We learn of his regard for the body of Secundus' Hymn where Patrick is said to have prepared his flesh "as a temple for the Holy Spirit; by whom, in pure activities, it is continually possessed; and he doth offer it to God as a living and acceptable sacrifice." But with typical Pauline realism, Patrick himself cautioned, "I do not trust myself as long as I am in the body of this death, because he is strong who daily endeavours to turn me away from the faith." (7)

## **The Resurrection**

We see further evidence of Patrick's view of man when he speaks of the resurrection. "Most surely I deem that if this [death] should happen to me, I have gained my soul as well as my body, because without any doubt we shall rise on that day, in the clear shining of the sun, that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer, as sons of the living God, and joint heirs with Christ, and conformed to his image, that will be; since of him and through him and in him we shall reign." For Patrick this resurrection leads to eternal life where all who believe in Christ will live and reign with God forever.

## **God's Grace**

Salvation, according to Patrick, was from beginning to end the result of God's grace. "Most surely I deem that from God I have received what I am." "I am only worth what he himself has given me." In his emphasis on grace and faith, Patrick echoed the teachings of Paul and anticipated the doctrine of the Reformers of the sixteenth century. He confessed, "The Lord opened the understanding of my unbelief that, even though late, I might call my faults to remembrance, and that I might turn with all my heart to the Lord my God." It is thus that God "makes those who believe and obey to become children of God the Father and joint heirs with Christ."

## **Prayer Life**

Patrick believed in prayer. After he was converted as a young slave, he prayed dozens of times a day. To the end of his life, prayer was his constant strength. However, he saw no value in praying for the dead. He taught, "For he who did not in his life deserve to receive the sacrifice, how shall it be able to help him after death?"

## **The Coming of Christ**

Patrick also held definite ideas on the doctrine of last-day events. Regarding the second coming of Christ, he testified, "We look for his coming soon as the Judge of the quick and the dead." He taught that at this judgment all must give an account of every sin, large or small. However, he did not dismiss this event to the remote future but expected it soon. The signs had been fulfilled.

He viewed his own mission to Ireland in the light of the final

proclamation, "Behold, we are witness that the Gospel has been preached to the limit beyond which no man dwells."

### **Seventh-day Sabbath**

In practice, as well as doctrine, Patrick represented a type of Christianity that was unique in his day. The church at Rome taught by this time that the sanctity of the Sabbath had been fully transferred from the seventh day of the week to the first day, Sunday. However, Patrick and the Irish Church continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Even where the Irish conducted services on Sunday in honor of the resurrection of Jesus, they did not consider the day equal in sanctity to the seventh day. On Sunday a worshiper was taught that he could return to his work following the service. But on the seventh day Christians must do no work, for this was the Sabbath.

One of Patrick's early biographers reflects on Patrick's special relationship to the seventh day. "The angel was wont to come to him on every seventh day of the week, and, as one man talks with another, so Patrick enjoyed the angel's counsel and conversation." The same writer also mentions that the parents of a girl, who, against their wishes, wanted to remain unmarried, sought out Patrick "having taken advice given to them by God, heard of Patrick as a man who was visited by the everlasting God every seventh day."

### **Baptism by Immersion**

The early Irish Church practiced baptism for immersion by adults who had received instruction in the faith. Patrick is said to have baptized many people in wells, where the water was deep enough to allow for total immersion. One anecdote relates how he conducted a baptism in a river, "Thereafter Patrick went in his chariot, so that every one might see him, and that they might hear from him his voice, and the preaching of God's word by him. And then they believed in God and in Patrick. So Patrick repeats the order of baptism to them on the river, which was near them, and all the hosts are baptized therein." Other accounts show that he instructed adults before their baptism. There is no indication that he baptized infants.

### **Foot Washing and Lord's Supper**

Irish sources indicate that foot washing was a regular practice of the church. Normally foot washing and Communion followed baptism. Foot washing also signified a gesture of hospitality and an act of penitence. One legend mentions a certain bishop who washed Patrick's feet, and even the feet of his horses, after wronging the saint. Irish Christians practiced foot washing on Maunday Thursday in preparation for Easter and seemed also to have regularly used it in connection with Communion.

Secundus calls Patrick one "who draws heavenly wine in heavenly cups, and gives drink to the people of God from a spiritual chalice." To the daughters of Loegaire, Patrick is said to have counseled, "Ye cannot see Christ unless ye first taste death, and unless ye receive Christ's Body and his Blood." Together these

suggest that Patrick conducted Communion services in which the worshipers received both bread and wine.

### **No Popes**

Like Paul, Patrick had a high regard for the Christian ministry and seemed to have based his order and regulations on the instruction of the great New Testament apostle. He appears to have placed a bishop or overseer at the head of each church he organized. This leader was simply the priest or pastor of the congregation with no particular authority beyond his parish. A catalog of Irish saints mentions 350 bishops at the time of Patrick, all founders of churches with one head, Christ, and one chief, Patrick. No one outside Ireland is identified as a higher authority.

### **Married Priests**

Irish clerics did not follow the Roman practice of celibacy. Patrick openly and without embarrassment mentioned that his grandfather was a priest and his father a deacon. He himself may have been married. A later homily refers to Patrick's offspring by blood, by faith, by baptism and by doctrine. Several legends speak of his marriage but try to show that it was not consummated. Nevertheless, the idea that he was married persisted in the traditions and is probably genuine. Later Irish writers noted that a bishop should have no more than one wife. Bishops in Ireland continued to marry until the tenth century.

For Patrick and his fellow Irish ministers preaching was the principle vehicle for transmitting the gospel. The evidence suggests that their preaching was conducted in the language of the people and was characterized by clarity and simplicity with no dogmatic mold.

### **An Independent Church**

We have seen that the early Celtic Church of Ireland, with Patrick as its main founder, was for several centuries independent of the universal church of Rome. In its doctrine and practices it remained quite close to the earliest Christianity described in the New Testament. Eventually it was absorbed into conformity with the Roman See, but only after a long and bloody struggle.

A veil of obscurity still conceals most of Patrick's life. Yet enough of his teachings and practices seeps through to permit a rather different picture of him from that assumed by his most devoted celebrants today. During the season when he is most remembered let us consider well who he really was and follow his example of biblical faith and practice.

Used by Permission of the author. Dr. Warren C. Trenchard is provost of LaSierra University in LaSierra, California.

References:

(1) My principle source of information on Patrick is Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church*, Church Historical Society Series, No. 91 (London: S.P.C.K. for the

Church Historical Society, 1972). Quotations from Patrick and other primary source material about him are cited from Hardinge, unless otherwise noted.

(2) Dates suggested for his birth range from A. D. 370 to 390.

(3) Patrick gives his birthplace as Bannaven of Tabernia - a place that can no longer be identified. Cited by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 4: 48.

(4) Cited by Schaff, *Ibid.*

(5) Cited by Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1937-45), 1:218.

(6) Dates suggested for his death range from 460 to 495.

(7) Cf. Romans 7: 24.