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Who Was St. Patrick?

March 16, 2023



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

St. Patrick was more than the Americanized way of celebrating him. His life's work is marked by faithfulness to evangelism and the gospel.

Transcript

(music) Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything I'm Kevin DeYoung today. Just a short piece that I've reworked from something I wrote years ago about St. Patrick. I thought I'd clean it up, make it a little more of a generic piece that perhaps people can revisit from time to time or year by year when we come up to the St. Patrick's Day holiday.

So this is simply called Who Was St. Patrick? You can find it on clearlyreformed.org. I've heard it said that representatives from Ireland have come to America to see what we do for St. Patrick's Day. It's a strange holiday on the American calendar filled with shamrock shakes, green dyed rivers and lots and lots of drinking. I'll leave it to the Irish to decide if we've captured the essence of their culture, but we certainly haven't captured the essence of St. Patrick.

As is the case with many saints and heroes from the early church, getting to the "historical" Patrick can be difficult. One reliable source, however, is Richard Fletcher's excellent book, the Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity. For a readable scholarly treatment on the long, slow, amazing transition in Europe from Paganism to Christianity, there is no better book.

And what does Fletcher say about Patrick? First off, we need to know what Patrick did not do. Here's a paragraph from Fletcher's book. He did not expel snakes from Ireland.

The snakelessness of Ireland had been noted by the Roman geographer Solanus in the third century. He did not compose that wonderful hymn known as St. Patrick's breastplate. Its language post dates him by about three centuries.

He did not drive a chariot three times over his sister, "Lupate" to punish her on chastity.

He did not use the leaves of the shamrock to illustrate the persons of the Trinity for his converts. True, he might have done so, but it is not until the 17th century that we are told that he did.

Determining fact from fiction for Patrick is particularly tricky because his writings were not always passed along reliably and because he wrote "in remarkably poor Latin". With little formal education, Patrick did not handle Latin well. Fletcher says Patrick's Latin is quote simple, awkward, laborious, sometimes ambiguous, occasionally unintelligible.

Bad writing and bad sources have meant plenty of bad information about St. Patrick. There was a broader consensus, however, on the basic outline of his life. Patrick, who lived his adult life in the 400s, was actually British, not Irish.

He was born into a Christian family with priests and deacons for relatives, but by his own admission he did not grow up a good Christian. As a teenager, he was carried by Irish raiders into slavery in Ireland, his faith deepened during this six-year ordeal. Upon escaping Ireland, he went back home to Britain.

While with his family, however, he received a dream in which God called him to return to Ireland to convert the pagans there to Christianity. In his *Confessio*, Patrick writes movingly about his burden to evangelize the Irish. He explicitly links his vocation to the commands of Scripture.

Biblical illusions like "The nations will come to you from the ends of the earth, and I have put you as a light among the nations, and I shall make you fishers of men flow from his pin." Seeing his life's work through the lens of Matthew 28 in Acts 1, Patrick prayed that God would "never allow me to be separated from his people, whom he has won in the end of the earth." For Patrick, the end of the earth was Ireland. Over decades, Patrick is reported to have made "many thousands of converts." He evangelized the cities and in the countryside. He encouraged the monastic way of life, ordained priests, and planted churches.

Patrick was also, to use Fletcher's phrase, "soaked in the Bible." To be steeped in the scriptures was not unheard of. What was new was Patrick's understanding of the Bible's missionary mandate. Patrick understood that God wanted the church to win the nations of the world for Christ.

Fletcher argues that no one within Western Christendom had been possessed by such convictions before. As far as our evidence goes, Patrick was the first person in Christian history to take the scriptural injunctions literally. To grasp that teaching all nations meant teaching even barbarians, who lived beyond the borders of the frontiers of the Roman Empire.

This is Patrick's legacy, a pious and zealous desire to see the great commission fulfilled

even, or especially, the very same Irish who had once made him their slave. Our culture may remember St. Patrick in goofy and sometimes dangerous ways, but it is good that we remember him. It's unfortunate that the forefather of Western missions is chiefly celebrated by drinking beer and dreaming of leprechauns, but at least he is celebrated.

We don't know much for certain about Patrick, but what we know of his ambition and ministry should be enough to make all of us a little green with sanctified envy.

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