

Ancient Irish Christianity: The Now Hidden Conflict with Rome!

Having been raised an Irish Roman Catholic in Dublin and the West of Ireland and educated in Irish schools many ask me to talk about St Patrick and the origin of the day. Here are some thoughts and notes.

A quick internet search on Patrick reveals an interesting phenomenon. Many of the websites will tell you that Patrick (during or after the death of Pope Celestine around 437) was sent to Ireland to bring the Catholic faith to the scattered Christians and a predominantly pagan land. But a closer look into the writings of ancient Catholic historians reveals major theological conflicts between Celtic Christian beliefs and that of Rome's evolving theology soon after Patrick's success. Catholic historians actually admit to changing the statements found in some of the early Irish writings because of their contrary nature. They say they "salted the ancient Celtic writings with *Roman salt*." The word heretical is often used to describe their content.

Patrick's own writings are silent as to any commission given by a pope. His autobiography even admits that his Celtic church community in North Britain or Scotland had doubts about his singular conviction because his years of slavery had prevented him from obtaining a proper academic education. The fact is that early New Testament Christianity spread in its primitive form by natural means without the existence of a centralized control. Roman Catholicism's later centralized system grew in power and sought to dominate scattered Christendom, but met with much resistance. The history of Irish Christianity reveals accounts of this conflict.

Patrick himself states that his call came from conviction regarding a dream where he saw the Irish calling him to share the gospel. His scope of reference is his own, relatively isolated, Christian community. Christianity in the north of England appeared to be small enough that it seemed to have lost its foothold thereafter during the period of Christian growth in Ireland and ironically, the Irish converted by Patrick later brought its presence back into the region. Patrick felt called by Christ; and he constantly refers to Jesus as the only authority that he acknowledges as supreme King, who is above all earthly rulers. Some supported him while others resisted his call. This caused him much pain.

There is no evidence of a pilgrimage to Rome or of knowledge of Rome as the "seat of the church". It appears as though that early church was scattered and that small Christian communities operated, largely independently, based on common convictions of Scripture. As Celtic Christianity grew, it became more organized, but when Augustine arrived in England about 150 years later to claim the Christians to Rome's order there was considerable conflict. Many quotations by early Catholic historians refer to a schism between the two parties. In studying my Catholic encyclopedia these particular conflicts are completely ignored except for a brief mention of the Easter conflict which continued for over 200 hundred years. Its ending, they imply, was around the year 701 AD with Iona's final acceptance of the Catholic date.

The Celtic Christians were actually ridiculed by Roman bishops for thinking they could accomplish anything, being so few in number compared to the great might and scope of Roman Catholicism. Yet over the next two centuries when the obstinate little group made incredible inroads in Europe and England, their missionary zeal is mentioned in the Catholic encyclopedia, as though it was wholly driven and supported by Rome. This claim is in clear denial of their own ancient historians, such as Bede, who lamented the state of the Irish resistance to papal doctrine and authority.

Catholic faith was gradually introduced to the Irish but not without much long-standing resistance by major members of the Celtic Church; records held by Catholic historians clearly reveal this. It is interesting that what trickles down now through Catholic sources is that Patrick, Columille (Columba), Aidan, Columbanus and others were all Catholic saints merely extending Rome's centrality. Even ancient Catholic sources testify that nothing could be further from the truth.

It is likely that later Catholic educators, with anxious feelings over the Protestantism that arose out of the belly of Catholicism in the 1500's, took liberty to withhold this information from the Irish and the general populace. When Henry the VIII made his questionable change to Protestantism for political benefit the then Catholic Ireland came under persecution and conflict with Britain. Catholicism held its strength in attaching its value in the hearts of the Irish to their national heritage, so it was advantageous to paint these early Irish and British Christians as papal emissaries. Had Rome admitted to the centuries of resistance by the Irish church it might have weakened the unquestioning faith in her supposed primacy and infallibility on earth.

The resistance to Catholicism in the early centuries was not isolated to the Irish alone. History attests to many other Christian communities throughout Europe and beyond that resisted the papal shifts in doctrine. These shifts were made to facilitate political dominion and win pagan minds to a less objectionable and hybridized belief than simple New Testament faith.

In short, the isolation of the early Irish and Scottish Christians and its stark difference to what later came from Rome's new centralized religion, reveals evidence that the Bible also supports. That is that Rome's doctrinal corruption from that simple faith of New Testament Christianity was evident. It was met with shock by those communities mercifully isolated from her subtle and gradual compromise.

Even if we were to cast Irish history aside and believe the Catholic record now forwarded to the general laity, the Bible itself raises grave concerns as to Rome's adulteration of the Truth of Christ.

The Book of Daniel reveals that Pagan Rome, after the death of Christ, would undergo some strange transition. It would claim God's throne on earth. It would exalt its throne to heaven and think to change times and laws (Daniel 7:25). It would also engage in the persecution of God's people for a period that fits the reign of papal persecutions which lasted up into the late 1700's. It was passages like this and Paul's statements about justification by faith that led the Catholic monks and priests, like Luther and others, to take such strong positions regarding reform. The gospel of Jesus was literally sold for the price of political power and the control of men's consciences. Some Catholic monks, seeing the corruption and divine insight of prophecy, rose to denounce the apostasy from the principles of Christ. Huss and Jerome, who preceded Luther, were executed while yet Catholic, for their exposure of the corruption.

Notes from *The Celtic Church in Britain* by Leslie Harding: pages 2-20.

Sources generally agree that Patrick was taken into slavery by Irish Celts in his young manhood or teens. He may have lived originally in Scotland or Northwestern England. He was most likely born around 388 AD, coming from three generations of clergy. The remains of Christianity in these regions is sparse and it seems to have somewhat died out by the time Augustine arrived from Rome in 597 about a century and

a half after Patrick's mission began. But from Patrick's writings we can see Christianity did exist there in communities much like the early church.

- He spent about six years, it seems, in captivity as a shepherd or farm slave.
- He escaped and got back to what we now know as Great Britain's mainland.
- While there he received a dream in which he saw the young people of Ireland calling him to bring the gospel to them.
- Patrick's writings reveal that he felt sorely inadequate because of his lack of learning. He also was grieved that many in the church at his home did not acknowledge his call and thought him too unlearned.
- Patrick set up churches in Ireland, though there were some Christians already there.
- In Patrick's confessions there are around 200 scriptural quotations. This shows his reverence for the word of God.

Readings from the *Confessions of Saint Patrick*:

I came to the Irish people to preach the Gospel and endure the taunts of unbelievers, putting up with reproaches about my earthly pilgrimage, suffering many persecutions, even bondage, and losing my birthright of freedom for the benefit of others.

If I am worthy, I am ready also to give up my life, without hesitation and most willingly, for Christ's name. I want to spend myself for that country, even in death, if the Lord should grant me this favor.

It is among that people that I want to wait for the promise made by him, who assuredly never tells a lie. He makes this promise in the Gospel: "They shall come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." This is our faith: believers are to come from the whole world.

More Notes from *The Celtic Church in Britain* by Leslie Harding:

The Roman Empire's wide range had afforded the spread of early New Testament Christianity even to Ireland, one of the remotest parts in the west, then known as Hibernia. But there would have been extremely few Christians there. It is not known from whence they came in the empire. It is possible that the invading Huns drove many of the learned men westward, as is cited in some of the early writings. The Britons were largely pagan. Britain in its early usage is inclusive of the islands of Ireland and Great Britain.

Because of Britons extremity, the doctrines of Ireland and Scotland remained largely unaffected by the progressive changes of Roman centralized faith for some time.

When Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine and arrived in approximately 431 AD, setting up three churches, he met with little success in converting the Irish and died in England as he was making his return to Rome.

Augustine had little success in convincing the Celtic Christians that he was their superior by the Pope's order. Since the time that Christianity first reached Ireland and since Patrick evangelized Ireland, Roman Christianity had become politically centralized and the bishop of Rome had taken on a supremacy that would have hitherto been rejected as unbiblical. Those Celtic clergy who met with Augustine were instructed that if he did not treat them as their equal by rising from his chair then they should not hear him. He not only remained seated but commenced to give commands requiring their compliance to papal mandates.

There are statements by Catholic historians that express concern and horror at the apostate doctrines of the Celts and their differences in ritual and festivals. In their first encounters, neither group seemed to have understood the beliefs of the other and there was much confusion over this.

Augustine sought to convert the Saxons to Catholic faith but the Celts would not join in the evangelism. Yet the Celts continued themselves to evangelize regions of England and beyond.

Columba, known by the Irish as Saint Columcille, carried on the missionary zeal of Patrick from the Island of Iona around 563, with his small band of followers. Scotland and Northern England had remained largely pagan, but Columba succeeded in reestablishing Christianity there. Other Irish missionaries reached out from the east of Ireland to Gaul and other European settlements. As time passed, more and more ventured to remote islands and then to other lands. This might have, in part, been due to the pressure and persecution by Romanism. Some of the Celtic bishops were converting to the Catholic faith, which led to an uneasy conflict.

Aidan, about 635 AD, set up base at Lindisfarne and succeeded in winning the aid of King Oswald and converted many in Northumbria. Aidan succeeded where Augustine had had little success. Scotland and England's cradle of Christianity ironically came from the Irish in the 600's. It existed before that but in very meager expanse.

Columbanus, around the end of the 500's or early 600's moved to northern France and began evangelizing there. Conflict, perhaps from Roman Christianity, drove them through Switzerland and eventually into Italy. King Agilulf there granted him lodging and a school of learning was set up that established great reputation.

Some ventured north of Ireland to the Shetlands and Faroe Islands and from there to Iceland. It was in relation to these islands that a Norwegian commentator reveals the opinion that these were Africans, that is Jews. Most likely their Biblical doctrines and customs earned them that name. Sabbath observance, practiced universally by the early

church, most likely left that impression. Sources reveal that even in Rome the Jewish Sabbath remained in observance along with the Roman Sunday up to about 400 years after Christ. But more isolated Christians knew little of the observance of Sunday and kept Sabbath alone. It is said of Columba that he laid down his labors in death on the day of rest, which is the Sabbath. The commentator notes that it was his custom to rest on that day.

Here is an ancient Irish song that suggests a resistance to the popular idea of pilgrimage to Rome that Roman Christianity called for:

*Going to Rome, Going to Rome
Twill bring no profit only trouble
The King thou there wouldst quest
Not found shall be, if he go not in they breast*

In other words, if you go there to seek Jesus, you will not find Him there unless he be in your own heart. This would have been a rebuke to those succumbing to the Roman ideals and following the tradition of pilgrimage to Rome to enhance spirituality and acknowledge the Papal See as the heart of spirituality.

The Irish Celts had an incredible zeal for spreading their faith in dangerous circumstances and with little resources. One account mentions men setting sail without oars in a small coracle with only enough food and water for seven days. On the seventh day they arrived on the coast of northern England and commenced their mission work. They literally threw themselves in faith upon the mercy of God.

What is striking here are the parallels between the Celtic Church and the Remnant Church of the last Days.

- A small group, tiny group in relation to centralized Roman Catholicism, succeeded in impacting a huge area of Europe with the gospel. They had an incredible publishing work....copies of the Word engineered by hand..... that spread the knowledge of the Word of God. Copies of the early illuminations still exist. These are astonishingly beautiful and contain much rich art. Though the small bands of Celts were jeered by Rome for their size and sparse resources they succeeded in a great Mission outreach.
- They saw education as a major tool and set up schools of learning wherever they went. The Bible was their central source of education
- As time progresses the pressure of larger society succeeded in wresting their missionary zeal from its purity. In order to avail of the resources of Roman rule and support they began to compromise their unique faith. Though they grew in number they shrank in biblical spirituality. Now as then there is pressure to conform to centralized control and human kingly rule. Revelation reveals this scenario same at the end. Those who have connection with the Word and the

Spirit do not yield to a human authority which seeks to set itself up above God while ignoring the counsel of the true witness. "Here are they that keep the commandments and have the testimony of Jesus. And the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

- They had no pontiff but prized skill in the Word and devotion to God as qualifiers of authority. Their organization was not top heavy but respected the priesthood of all believers.
- Their eventual compromise was met with invasion by the Danes and the monasteries and schools were pillaged and destroyed. More and more they became dependent on papal protection.
- Rome met their initial arguments with skillful higher criticism and established the concept that the "mysterious" word of God could only be interpreted by those learned men sanctioned by the pontiff. Higher criticism sought to silence the prophets while claiming to support them. After all the prophets were "just human" and needed help in what they were trying to say. This approach was necessary to hide the obvious contradictions in Roman practice and that of the Word. This trend is occurring regarding the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White today.
- The shaking we will face will be a terrible ordeal as was that of the Irish Church.

"Through those that have a form of godliness but know not the power, we can gain many who would otherwise do us great harm. Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God will be our most effective helpers. Those of this class who are apt and intelligent will serve as decoys to draw others into our snares. Many will not fear their influence, because they profess the same faith. We will thus lead them to conclude that the requirements of Christ are less strict than they once believed, and that by conformity to the world they would exert a greater influence with worldlings. Thus they will separate from Christ; then they will have no strength to resist our power, and ere long they will be ready to ridicule their former zeal and devotion. {4SP 339.3} "Until the great decisive blow shall be struck, our efforts against commandment-keepers must be untiring. We must be present at all their gatherings. In their large meetings especially our cause will suffer much, and we must exercise great vigilance, and employ all our seductive arts to prevent souls from hearing the truth and becoming impressed by it. {4SP 340.1} "I will have upon the ground, as my agents, men holding false doctrines mingled with just enough truth to deceive souls. I will also have unbelieving ones present, who will express doubts in regard to the Lord's messages of warning to his church. Should the people read and believe these admonitions, we could have little hope of overcoming them. But if we can divert their attention from these warnings, they will remain ignorant of our power and cunning, and we shall secure them in our ranks at last. God will not permit his words to be slighted with impunity. If we can keep souls deceived for a time, God's mercy will be withdrawn, and he will give them up to our full control. {4SP 340.2} "We must cause distraction and division. We must destroy their anxiety for their own souls, and lead them to criticise, to judge, and to accuse and condemn one another, and to cherish selfishness and enmity. For these sins, God banished us from his presence; and all who follow our example will meet a similar fate."

Brian Dunne.