

Saint Patrick: Separating Missionary Fact From Fictitious Malarkey

March 17, 2017

by David Schrock

What comes to mind when you think of St. Patrick's Day?

Leprechauns. Ireland. Wearing green. Or drinking green beer. If that is it, you may want to re-read the record books.

A few years back, Russell Moore gave [a brief history lesson on the real Patrick](#) that should make every missionally-minded Christian sit up and take notice. Drawing on the Philip Freeman's 2007 book, [St. Patrick of Ireland: A Biography](#), Moore summarizes Freeman's work:

Freeman helpfully retells Patrick's conversion story, one of a mocking young hedonist to a repentant evangelist. The story sounds remarkably similar to that of Augustine—and, in the most significant of ways, both mirror the first-century conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Freeman helpfully reconstructs the context of local religion as a "business relationship" in which sacrifice to pagan gods was seen as a transaction for the material prosperity of the worshippers. Against this, Patrick's conversion to Christianity was noticed quickly, when his prayers of devotion—then almost always articulated out loud—were overheard by his neighbors.

The rest of the narrative demonstrates the ways in which Patrick carried the Christian mission into the frontiers of the British Isles—confronting a hostile culture and institutionalized heresy along the way. With this the case, the life of Patrick is a testimony to Great Commission fervor, not to the Irish nationalism most often associated with the saint. As a matter of fact, Freeman points out that Patrick's love for the Irish was an act of obedience to Jesus' command to love enemies and to pray for persecutors.

Likewise, Kevin DeYoung, also from the archives (ca. 2011), provides a brief missionary biography of Patrick. He says,

Here's what most scholars agree on: Patrick—whose adult life falls in the fifth century—was actually British, not Irish. He was born into a Christian family with priests and deacons for relatives, but by his own admission, he was not a good Christian growing up. 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 he received a dream in which God called him to go back to Ireland to convert the Irish pagans 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 allusions 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 pen. Seeing his life's work through the lens of Matthew 28 and 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 ends of the earth was Ireland.

According to one historian (again I am citing DeYoung's research) "[Patrick] was the first person in Christian history to take the scriptural injunctions literally" (Richard Fletcher, [The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity](#), 86) meaning that he was the first person to take the Great Commission as a command. Rightly, Patrick read Matthew 28:19 as a calling for him, and so he left home to take the gospel to pagans of Ireland.

This literal and personal reading of disciple-making needs to be reissued today, because some still think Jesus' words are for someone else. Tragically, they relegate Jesus' missionary imperative to a bygone era or for some special class of people. Yet, as Patrick's life and labors show, when men take seriously the call to be a disciple-making disciple, God will bring great blessings. Fifteen centuries later we have much to learn from Patrick.

I encourage you to read the rest of Moore's blogpost ([What evangelicals can learn from Saint Patrick](#)) and DeYoung's foray into history ([Who was Saint Patrick?](#)). Together these two brief posts will help you determine fact from fiction. They will give you many reasons to thank God for the missions-minded Brit who brought the light of the gospel to the whole nation of Ireland.

May Patrick's brave example spur us on to share the gospel with our own pagan nation and hostile neighbors.

Sola Deo Gloria, dss