

Patrick Transforms a Nation: An Example for Today

By Stephen McDowell

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Can a nation be transformed?

America is obviously in need of Biblical transformation, as are all the nations of the world. But can we really expect such transformation to ever occur? Can God's Kingdom come to earth and His will be done here as it is in heaven? Can a nation experience Biblical transformation in our lifetime?

First, since Jesus taught us to pray for this, we can have assurance it can occur. Jesus also gave us the commission to disciple the nations (Matthew 28:18-20), as this is a part of His plan for man while living on earth. In addition, there are many examples in history. Perhaps the greatest example of how Biblical revival transforms nations occurred in the fifth through the seventh centuries, beginning when a young Celt was carried to Ireland as a slave.

Patrick of Ireland was an outstanding example of a man who disciplined a nation. He was a world figure; one of the very great among men; "one of the dominant personalities of world history."¹ He completely transformed Ireland in his lifetime and set the nation on its destiny. His work in Ireland was a world event. Historian Seumas MacManus writes:

All histories of all countries probably could not disclose to the most conscientious searcher another instance of such radical change in a whole nation's character being wrought within the lifespan of one man.²

There was a complete transformation of Ireland from the time before and after Patrick. The people before Patrick were worshiping idols and "were carrying the ruthless law of the sword far over sea and land" enslaving those they encountered. After Patrick, the worship of the living God was predominant throughout the nation, and the Irish people "left the conquering sword to be eaten by rust, while they went far and wide again over sea and land, bearing now to the nations— both neighbouring and far off— the healing balm of Christ's gentle words."³



Patrick's providential preparation is an amazing story. Around the year 389 A.D., at the age of 15 or 16, Patrick was captured and enslaved by Irish marauders. He spent six years as a slave in Ireland during his impressionable years. He learned the language, religion, and culture and became an Irishman in many ways. Most importantly, he was converted, remembering his Christian upbringing, and had the seeds of his life work planted in him. His life of a shepherd gave him much time to pray and seek God. He eventually escaped Ireland, acting upon a vision from the Lord, and would not return for over 35 years.⁴

Patrick was about 58 years old when God sent him back to Ireland to fulfill his destiny. His work for the next 28 years brought about as great a transformation in a nation as any man has ever wrought during his lifetime.

The foundation of his life work, and what is needed to transform nations today, was laid in Patrick while he was a slave in Ireland. Brought up in a Christian home, as a youth Patrick had forgotten God and wandered into the ways of sin, but he was awakened unto God. He writes in his *Confessions*, "And there the Lord opened the understanding of my unbelief so that at length I might recall to mind my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord, my God, who hath . . . taken pity on my youth and ignorance."⁵

Patrick had much time to pray while he watched the flocks day and night, writing:

I was always careful to lead my flocks to pasture, and to pray fervently. The love and fear of God more and more inflamed my heart; my faith enlarged, my spirit augmented, so that I said a hundred prayers by day and almost as many by night. I arose before day in the snow, in the frost, and the rain, yet, I received no harm, nor was I affected with slothfulness. For then the spirit of God was warm within me.⁶



Patrick spent over six years in slavery, where he was first miraculously delivered from spiritual bondage and then from physical bondage. In a dream he was told to travel to a seashore some 200 miles away where he would find a ship to make his escape. He slipped away one day and found the ship as in his dream. God used his time of captivity to prepare him for his destiny. He had surrendered his life to the Lord and had become an Irishman. During his impressionable years, he had learned the language and customs of Ireland and had a deep love for the people implanted in his heart through his continued times of prayer in the countryside.

Upon returning to Britain, he was happily reunited with his family, but Ireland filled his thoughts. He was not sure what this meant, until one night he had a vivid dream of a man coming from Ireland delivering a message from the people there saying, “Come to us, O holy youth, and walk among us.” Patrick said, “With this I was feelingly touched, and could read no longer: I then awoke.”⁷

He now knew he must prepare himself, so he left home to study for the ministry. During the next number of decades he traveled to many parts of Europe to gain what training he could. Finally, around the age of 58 he reached Ireland in 432 A.D. in the fourth year of the reign of Laoghaire.

He encountered much opposition and difficulties, but he saw God move miraculously on his behalf. He first landed near Vartry in Wicklow County, where he preached and baptized some but was then driven out. He went north and landed in Down where he was attacked by Dichu, who, upon seeing and hearing Patrick, lowered his arms and surrendered his life to God. Patrick later built a church upon this spot, called Sabhall Padraic, to commemorate his first convert in the north.

Patrick traveled throughout the land bringing Christ to all who listened. Many were converted and followed him, including a young lad named Benin, who would come to fill Patrick’s place as leader in the church and head of the school of Armagh, one of many established to train new leaders. Benin would also write the great and valuable *Book of Rights*.

Early on, Patrick challenged the pagan worship of the Irish. After violating the tradition of lighting a fire before the Druid priests lit their sacred fire, Patrick and his followers were compelled to appear before the pagan King Laoghaire. As they marched toward the king’s court, the Druid minions lay in ambush to kill them. Patrick had composed a prayer or hymn that the missionaries chanted on the way. This was later called *Faed Fiada*, or Deer’s Cry, for when Patrick and his companions walked by those who were hiding, they did not see men, but “a harmless herd of gentle deer, a doe followed by her twenty fawns.” Thus, they arrived safely at the king’s court in Tara.

This first hymn written in Gaelic has been used down throughout the years by the Irish as a prayer of protection.

Patrick’s Prayer/Hymn – Deer’s Cry

I bind me to-day,
God’s might to direct me,
God’s power to protect me,
God’s wisdom for learning,
God’s eye for discerning,
God’s ear for my hearing,
God’s word for my clearing.
God’s hand for my cover,
God’s path to pass over,
God’s buckler to guard me,
God’s army to ward me,

Against snares of the devil,
 Against vice's temptation,
 Against wrong inclination,
 Against men who plot evil,
 A near or afar, with many or few.
 Christ near,
 Christ here,
 Christ be with me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ within me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ be o'er me,
 Christ before me.
 Christ in the left and the right,
 Christ hither and thither,
 Christ in the sight,
 Of each eye that shall seek me
 In each ear that shall hear,
 In each mouth that shall speak me –
 Christ not the less,
 In each heart I address
 I bind me today on the Triune — I call,
 With faith in the Trinity – Unity – God over all.⁸



Patrick was confronted by the Druid priests who sought to use their magic to overpower him. But God performed such miracles through Patrick, and his words were of such wisdom, that many began to be converted, including the queen and several prominent members of the court. While Laoghaire remained a pagan, he, nonetheless, was so moved by Patrick that he allowed him to travel throughout his domain and preach to whom he wished.

Patrick went into other parts of Ireland, dispelling the darkness with the light of the Gospel, making many converts, including King Laoghaire's two daughters. His influence grew mightily, to the point where all the serpents and venomous things were driven out of Ireland, which is true spiritually more so than physically. (While there are no snakes in Ireland, this was probably the case before Patrick arrived.⁹)

Over the years, thousands of people were converted including many kings and leaders of the people. "An unquenchable burning desire for bringing souls to Christ was the passion of Patrick's life."¹⁰ In addition to multitudes of converts, Patrick worked to bring transformation in all spheres of life:

- He saw untold thousands converted.
- He founded 700 churches.
- He trained and set in place Church leadership — 700 bishops and 3000 ministers.
- He set up training centers to educate thousands.
- He transformed civil government, working with kings to establish godly laws. He wrote the *Liber Ex Lege Moisi*, which were extracts from the Laws of Moses. He directed the compilation of the laws known as *Senchus Mor*, revising old laws in accordance with Biblical precepts. *Liber* and *Senchus Mor* became the basis for civil law in Ireland.

"He worked so many miracles and wonders, that the human mind is incapable of remembering or recording the amount of good which he did upon the earth."¹¹ He carried on his nation-changing work with great confidence in the Lord, but with great humility, writing in his *Confessions*, "I was a stone, sunk in the mire till He who is powerful came, and in His mercy, raised me up."¹²

After saving the life of a local chief, Patrick was given the Hill of Armagh in thanks. Here he founded the city of Armagh which became the center for Christian training that would impact all of Europe. Within a few centuries the work and schools of Armagh would grow to the point where the place would become “not only the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland but the capital of civilisation.”¹³ Being advanced in years, Patrick placed Benin over the church and school of Armagh.

In his later years Patrick directed, as mentioned above, the compilation of the laws known as *Senchus Mor*. He revised the old laws in accordance with Biblical precepts. These laws were also known as the *Brehon Laws* (from the Irish name of the official lawgiver). He also wrote his famous *Confession* and other works, which still inspire people today. He died around the year 460, but his work would impact Ireland and all of Europe for centuries to come.

Fruit of Patrick’s Work Transformed a Continent

Many other nations were impacted through those who were trained in the churches, seminaries, and schools Patrick started. Many holy men and women continued Patrick’s work. The three greatest Irish saints were Patrick, Bridget and Colm Cille (Columba).

In the centuries succeeding Patrick, Christians swarmed forth, like bees from a hive, from the Irish monasteries and schools to distant lands carrying the faith and truth that brought many people out of barbarism. One historian wrote: “It was thus, when the whole world seemed irrecoverably sunk in barbarism . . . the Irish went forth into every part of the world,” to spread Christianity and knowledge.¹⁴

The barbarians (Vandals, Huns, Franks, Visigoths, Saxons, Angles, Jutes, etc.) swept through Europe in the 400s, conquering and destroying all before them. The light of the Gospel in much of Europe was threatened to be extinguished. It was at this crucial time that the fruit of the work of Patrick in Ireland began to grow. One modern book’s title describes the influence: *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. Carrying Christianity, Ireland’s sons “became the teachers of whole nations, the counsellors of kings and emperors.”¹⁵ In addition, Christians from all over England and Europe flocked to Ireland to be trained in the Holy Scriptures, only to return to their lands to sow all that they had learned.

[To learn of the impact of Patrick’s work as well other reformers throughout history, order a copy of *Biblical Revival and the Transformation of Nations* via our online Store or calling 434-978-4535.]

End Notes

¹ Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race*, New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1967, p. 124.

² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See MacManus, pp. 111 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴ Dr. Wattenback, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 232.