How Patrick Opened a Door for the Gospel
Colossians 4:2-6

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Few of the people dressed in green at parades yesterday realized that they were celebrating the day on which a great missionary died. Patrick died on March 17 in 460 AD. While he was not Irish by birth, by the time he died Patrick had become Irish by love, and he was buried in County Down. His story and the story of the Celtic Church have a lot to teach us about loving people into the faith in the 21st century.

Patrick grew up in Scotland in a Christian family. They were Celts themselves, known as Britons, in the days before the Angles and Saxons with their Germanic language and religion came into England, and long before the Normans brought French language and culture in 1066. Patrick grew up in the last days of the Roman Empire. It was the Romans who had brought Christianity to England, and while it was different from the Roman Catholic Church today, the church in England and Scotland used Latin and expected people to be civilized—to act like people in Rome.

Now all that was falling apart as Roman power receded and finally disappeared altogether. Even in Britain, tribalism, crime, and violence were increasing. And Ireland was considered beyond the reach of civilization entirely. A few Christians had migrated there, but Ireland had never been under Roman control. It was ruled by tribal warlords—something like Afghanistan today. Their Celtic religion celebrated the spirits of the natural world, mystery, and paradox. Their priests were called Druids. That religion had dominated the area from Ireland through France all the way to Galatia in the time of the apostle Paul. Most of that area had been Christianized by the Romans, but not Ireland. It was too far away from the center, so it was more like the Wild West.

Like the Vikings, some of the Celtic tribes from Ireland would raid settlements in England and France and take anything they could steal—including human beings. When Patrick was 16 years old, not very religious and said to be on the wild side, he was captured by a gang of Celts and sold as a slave in Ireland. He was owned by the kings of one of the tribes, who was also a Druid, and for six years he lived outdoors watching his flocks. Of course he was treated poorly, but Patrick said later that living in nature and being alone so much opened his heart to God. He became a devout Christian; he later wrote that he prayed 100 times in the day and 100 times in the night.

One day a voice told him to go, that his ship was ready. Patrick went directly to the coast, where he saw a ship which agreed to take him home to Britain and he escaped. At 22, Patrick was reunited with his parents. We don't know much about those years, but eventually he wound up in a monastery, probably in France, and was ordained as a priest.

When he was 48, Patrick heard another voice. He had a dream in which an angel came to him with a bundle of letters. He picked up one with the heading "The Voice of the Irish." Patrick said he dreamed he heard voices of people in a forest on the coast of Ireland, and they cried out in one voice, "We beg you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." Of course he was no longer a boy; he was in midlife and mid-career. But when he woke up he decided that this was a vision from God and that he must go to Ireland with the gospel. The bishops of the British

Church ordained him a bishop and sent him to Ireland on a mission with a group of priests, seminarians, and nuns.

Most people thought this mission was impossible. The Roman church assumed that in order to preach the gospel to a people, you first had to civilize them. You had to teach them Roman cultural values, to read and write, to worship properly in Latin, to clean themselves up. The whole model of a parish church was based on civilization—a town setting with a settled population and clear boundaries. But the Celtic people in Ireland were wanderers who did not live in stone houses. They had no towns to speak of. They had no exposure to Latin.

But Patrick had an advantage. He had lived six years among the people as a young man and he understood them. He knew the kind of communities they lived in. He knew their mystical nature religion and even their fascination with the number three. Patrick decided that it was not necessary to civilize people to show them that God loved them and open a door for the gospel. He would not build churches as the Romans had and invite the civilized to come. He would take his mission team and live alongside the people, demonstrating the gospel to them in an alternative and welcoming community.

Here was Patrick's strategy: his team did not spread out over the country preaching the gospel. Instead, they lived in community as Christians. Patrick would identify a tribe that he hoped to reach and settle right next to them. They would pitch their tents or build their mud-and-wood church right next to the Celts. Some have called these "monastic communities"—they were like monasteries in that they had a structured life with worship, but they included women and children and were not closed to the outside world but open to it. Patrick's community would welcome their neighbors in, inviting them for meals, helping their sick, doing whatever they could to serve and demonstrate the love of Jesus. Their songs and prayers were expressed in Celtic cultural forms. The prayers invoked nature and were similar in form to the invocations of the Druids, prayers for everyday worries, but they taught about the three-in-one God. These mission teams would not present the gospel and leave; they would stay for months until they had established an indigenous community to leave behind. They would leave one of their own behind to help guide the new Celtic Christian group, and they would take two young persons from the tribe with them on the road to be trained as future leaders.

Over the course of three decades, Patrick established 700 churches and ordained 1000 priests. By the time he died, Ireland was well on the way to becoming Christianized. It was not without controversy, of course. From the Druids, Patrick faced physical and verbal attacks. To them he was a heretic, a foreigner, and a madman. And from the home front in England, Patrick faced criticism that he was negligent in failing to civilize the Celts and turn them into proper members of the Roman church.

Over the course of the next century, though, it turned out that the uncivilized Celtic church was the one that "saved civilization." After the fall of Rome, the Roman church became weaker and weaker in Britain itself, then in France and in the Germanic countries where it was never well-established. It was the Celtic church of Ireland which became the missionary church, first evangelizing Scotland, then re-evangelizing England, then France and all of northwest Europe. It was due to the church established by Patrick that the Dark Ages turned into the Middle Ages and the flourishing of the church.

There were two keys to why Patrick's approach worked and the Romans' didn't. First, Patrick didn't try to civilize or Romanize before leading people to faith in Christ. This was the mistake repeated by so many western missionaries in the 19th century, to confuse civilizing with evangelizing. The Roman way worked if you were imposing religion with the power of the army

and the government, but it failed when the power of Rome failed. But the second key was that Patrick worked not by simply preaching the gospel but by establishing model communities for nonbelievers to experience.

A British scholar named John Finney wrote a book contrasting the Roman mission and the Celtic Mission (*Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission*, 1996). George Hunter, a professor at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky applied these ideas in a book called *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon, 2000). He draws a chart contrasting the two ways:

Roman Model	*Celtic Model*
Presentation	Fellowship
Decision	Ministry and Conversations
Fellowship	Belief, Invitation to Commitment

The Roman method for reaching people who were civilized enough to respond had three steps: (1) Present the Christian message; (2) Invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; and (3) If they decide positively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship. This seems logical to us because it's the way American evangelicals and Baptists have operated for a long time!

The Celtic model was different. The first step was to establish a sense of community with people, bringing them into your community through friendships, meals, and service—letting them experience what your community is like without any prior commitment, so that they experience the truth that you love them. The second step, once they were within your fellowship, was to engage in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship. The third step, in time, was that as they discover that they do believe, you invite them to make a commitment. [These two paragraphs adapted from Hunter p. 53.]

Do you get the difference? The Celtic model works because for most people "Christianity is more caught than taught." George Hunter asked new believers in churches "When did you feel like you really belonged, that you were *wanted* and *welcomed* and *included* in the fellowship of this church?" Most of the Boomer and Gen X converts said they felt like that *before* they believed and before they officially joined. Many of them said that the experience of fellowship *enabled* them to believe and to commit. A study done by John Finney in England showed that most people today encounter the gospel through a community of faith rather than the presentation of a message, and that becoming a Christian is a process that takes time. He summarized his chief finding in four words: "Belonging comes before believing."

I could ask Martha Ball to give a testimony on this point. She has often said that she took years becoming a part of the church before she came to the point of realizing that "Yes, I *do* believe" (on Palm Sunday of 2008 as she looked at the stained glass window of Jesus). I don't think that's unusual today—even though our model from Billy Graham and two centuries of revivalism is that a person hears the gospel, then believes, then joins the church. It's not necessarily so.

I wonder if we shouldn't rethink the whole idea of church membership. We are proposing bylaw changes to be voted upon April 7 that relieve the Deacons of the role of gatekeepers to church membership. The practice for some years here has been that if someone wants to be part of the fellowship they have to be interviewed by the Deacons, who ask them if they really believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and if they have been baptized. The new system is going to give the power to vote people into membership back to the congregation. But I think Saint Patrick and the Celtic Church might wonder at the whole idea of membership as something that comes after faith. Their way was to welcome the seeker into the community, to accept the

wanderer as he is and to meet his needs, assuming that if he sticks with the community he will pick up the faith—if we are living it authentically.

All of this takes for granted that we agree with Patrick rather than his Roman critics in England. Patrick saw the first purpose of the church in a pagan country—such as ours now is—to be reaching out to nonbelievers rather than taking care of the believers. The church leaders who sent Patrick to Ireland believed this, but the next generation was more typical; they were upset because Patrick was not seeking out the few Christians who lived in Ireland and taking care of *them.* Which side are we on? Does Harbor Church exist primarily to care for its members, or the tiny remnant of believers left on the island? Or does Harbor Church exist as a missional community which lives in Christian fellowship *for the purpose of* including nonbelievers so that they will eventually come to faith?

On Saint Patrick's Day, I'm with the Irish. I'm for including the heathen and speaking their language. I'm for opening a door for the gospel.