

OUR ANCIENT HERITAGE

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Covenant Reformed Fellowship

The Covenant Reformed Fellowship here in Northern Ireland have been greatly blessed by our God over the past few years. We now enjoy regular live preaching of the gospel in our worship services, our children receive full catechism instruction and we ourselves enjoy continuous study in our Father's precious Word. All this is so because the God who loves His people from before the foundation of the world has provided us with a missionary pastor through the Protestant Reformed Churches in the person of Rev Ron Hanko. Since our first coming in contact with the PRC we have learned much concerning the history both of that denomination and of the continental Reformed churches from which the denomination has come. This has caused us to thank our God that He has not turned His back on this island of Ireland but has kept safe a remnant of His own people (Romans 11:5).

History of Ireland

Our island home also has its place in church history. It is our part in that history that we would like to share with our brothers and sisters in the United States who have done so much for us.

The point of beginning of our church history is not at all clear. We do know that Ireland first heard the gospel at a very early period in church history. Some eminent authorities have concluded that the Scoto-Irish¹ church is the oldest of all the Protestant churches represented in modern Christendom. Although it is often held that the Waldenses were the most ancient among existing representatives of the faith, it is also asserted by many acute and trustworthy investigators that our island had a representation of the church which is much older. Many in the world today believe the Irish to be a people who are behind other nations in both religious and industrial progress, a people who therefore owe all that they have, that is worth having, to the crumbs that fell from their

neighbours' tables. in answer to that assertion we will say simply that many of the more important Celtic scholars and writers assure us that our church history is in fact the oldest that is known.

We know from ancient writings that many ancient people were turned from the Druids "to the adoration of God" (*The Annals of the Four Masters*). We also know from other accounts of church history that an Irishman, Coelestius, was the companion of the controversial Pelagius. It seems evident, therefore, that at a very early period there was a strong Christian movement in Ireland, which resulted in the organisation of a church. It is argued by Bishop Ussher that "this comparatively pure form of Christianity survived in the country, running as it were underground like some of our Irish streams, even when most rampant" (Ussher: *Discourse on the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish*). It would seem from historical record that, although we cannot be certain of the date of its beginning, we can be sure that 1500 years ago a part of the church of Jesus Christ could be found in these same hills of County Antrim where we now live and worship.

'Saint' Patrick

We can also look back to a day when God sent another of His servants from across the sea to bring the gospel of His saving grace to the people of this island. We can picture in our minds a young man sitting among the heather seeking to protect himself from the wind and rain for which this group of islands is so well known. Although he was only a youth, Patrick's heart had already felt bitter pangs of grief and disappointment. It must have caused great anguish for him as he remembered playing amidst the rolling hills of Britain when, without warning, his world had crashed about him. A band of roving Irishmen, bent on plunder and pillage, had invaded the shores of his native land of Scotland and, laying hands on him, carried him away captive to their island home. Ignorant of God's plan for his life, Patrick sat among the hills, given the task like the prodigal son of feeding the swine. Day and night his thoughts, no doubt, would wander to his home across the sea.

The years of Patrick's life slip by but somewhere among those years, in the providence of God, he hears the command of the gospel. The Holy Spirit, who had worked regeneration in his heart, provided him with faith to believe and obey that call. Eventually he escaped and made his way back to his native home where he was reunited with his family.

Patrick found, however, that he could not be content. Memories haunted him all the while and carried him back in thought to the land of his captivity. He thought of the people who inhabited its shores, of their idolatrous practices under the Druid priests, of their pagan rites and of the small number who represented Christ's church on earth in that land, and his heart was drawn to them in love. The call of God came ringing down the corridor of his soul and Patrick described his call thus:

"I saw, indeed, in the bosom of the night, a man, coming as it were from Ireland, with innumerable letters containing the 'Voice of the Irish.' While I was reading aloud, I myself thought indeed in my mind that I heard the voice of those who were by the Western Sea. And they cried out thus, as if with one voice, 'We intreat thee, holy youth, that thou come and henceforth walk among us.' I was deeply moved in heart and could read no further, and so I awoke."

God caused Patrick to be obedient to that call and in AD 432 he returned to Erin's Isle.² There he preached as a missionary pastor, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ for close to 30 years. Through his preaching and testimony God worked regeneration, conversion and salvation in the hearts of many of our ancient fathers.

In the years that followed, many of these converts took leave of their homeland to bear the good news of the gospel to many parts of Europe. Columba (or Columbkille) is one example of that missionary spirit. If Ireland is to be grateful to Scotland for Patrick, then surely Scotland must thank Ireland for Columba, 'The Apostle of the Northern Picts.' The converts from Ireland, heedless of the dangers that surrounded them, invaded the realms of darkness and brought the light of gospel truth to many in the British Isles, as well as in Germany, Italy, Switzerland and France. The dawn of light and truth had in God's mercy broken over Ireland. These hills and valleys that we now live among echoed to the praise of our mighty Triune God.

No historical account of Patrick and his times would be complete without stating the fact that Patrick was a great believer in the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Patrick's simple illustration of that doctrine using the three-leaved 'Shamrock' is famous among Christians the world over. Indeed, the Shamrock is now known to be the 'Badge of the Irish.'

We have looked at the religious state of Ireland 1500 years ago but what a change has taken place in the intervening years! As

we look at the island of Ireland today we see a land covered, for the most part, with a darkness of superstition as bad as anything to be found at the time of the Druids. Whence came this great darkness? What happened after the days of Patrick?

Influence of the Roman Catholic Church

It seems that, from the time that God first placed Patrick upon the stage of Ireland's church history up to AD 1171, the lamp of gospel truth burned to some degree within this Emerald Isle. There were, it seems, many Romish corruptions that crept into Irish Christianity but, nevertheless, there continued to be opposition to the extravagant claims of the Pope. At that time difficulties arose among the ruling High Kings of Ireland. Henry II, the Roman Catholic King of England, looked across to Ireland and a mixture of hatred for the people and greed for dominion stirred in his wicked heart. Henry made application to Pope Adrian IV for leave to invade the island's shores and to subject its simple people to the authority of the Roman See. Adrian, like his predecessors and as history in the rest of Europe shows, was more than anxious to extend his ecclesiastical authority. He granted Henry his request with the following reminder:

"There is indeed no doubt but that Ireland, and all the islands on which the Sun of Righteousness hath shone, and which have received the doctrine of the Christian Faith, do belong to the jurisdiction of St Peter and the Holy Roman Church, as your Excellency also doth acknowledge: and therefore we are the more solicitous to propagate the righteous plantation of faith in this land. For, then, our dear son in Christ, you have signified to us your desire to enter into this island of Ireland, in order to reduce the people to obedience under the laws and to extirpate the plants of vice, and that you are willing to pay from each house a yearly pension of one penny to St Peter. We, therefore, favourably assenting to your petition, do hold it good and acceptable that, for extending the borders of the Church, restraining the progress of vice, for the correction of manners, the planting of virtue, and the increase of religion, you enter this island, and execute therein whatever shall pertain to the honour of God and the welfare of the land." (Note: Adrian was the only Englishman to be a Pope. His real name was Nicholas Breakspear)

In AD 1171 the armies of King Henry landed at Waterford on the southeastern shores of the island, with the express purpose of conquering Ireland, not only for the English throne, but also and more importantly for the Church of Rome. Rome later boasted in the words of Pope Honorius III, "The English entered Ireland by the mandate of the Apostolic See, and subjugated it to the

obedience of the Roman Church." This subjugation was completed at the Synod of Cashel in 1172, when it was determined "that all things relating to religion for the future in all parts of Ireland be regulated according to the Church of England" (then under the jurisdiction of the Church of Rome).

At that point the Irish Church lost its national independence and became subservient to the church of Rome. That was indeed a tragic day for Ireland. Rev A E Hughes in his book, *Lift Up a Standard*, is right to declare, "No Englishman should read the story of the twelfth century without shame and humiliation." The landing of King Henry II upon Irish soil ushered in an era of English domination which remains at the root of the island's troubled recent history. According to one authority:

"This was the beginning of the real drama with which the fate of Ireland was to be identified. Only the ineradicable defiance of the Irish and a feeling of racial superiority on the part of the English can explain the hatreds and misunderstandings of that period. The most civilised people on the earth did not feel called upon to observe its promises towards a people it did not consider to be its equal. Indeed, in order to satisfy its hatreds, it kept the Irish in a state of near slavery while expressing unbounded astonishment at their backwardness and defects."

Now we see a sad contrast. In the early days of Ireland's Christianity, we saw a land of saints and scholars, noted for holiness and learning and for missionary efforts in other lands. From the twelfth century on, Ireland became known only for its superstition, fables, ignorance and barbarism. From 1171 until the Reformation the island remained in a very poor state. The English authority was limited to an area known as the 'Pale,' a small area around the city of Dublin. Rev Thomas Hamilton, in his *History of Presbyterianism*, states that "the people were oppressed rather than governed, and they groaned besides under the exactions and the vices of the Romish bishops and priests, who now, under the fostering wing of England, rode roughshod over them."

Effect of the Reformation

The Reformation in England led to the Irish Parliament throwing off the authority of the Pope and declaring the King as supreme head on earth of the Church of Ireland. This declaration, however, was in word only and no real attempt was made to win the people over to Protestantism. This same Church of Ireland today stands on the fence between a liberal form of Protestantism and full unity with Rome. It is hardly any wonder that the

Reformation made little progress when the preaching of the gospel and of true doctrine was neglected. There was, however, a representative body of true Protestants in the island. Despite the persecutions under Mary in 1558, they survived until Protestantism was established once more in England.

Ireland was in a wretched state during most of the reign of Elizabeth. Civil war disturbed and desolated the kingdom, as one Irish King after another rebelled against the English throne. Before Elizabeth died, however, the rebellions had been put down and Ireland settled to some little peace. The year 1607 saw the beginnings of Irish Presbyterianism, which up until recently has been the Reformed church in this island and the church where we in the Covenant Reformed Fellowship find our own history. The history of the time between 1607 and 1921 is a complicated one but it is one that teaches us a lesson. The lesson is this, that the use of force rather than the 'preaching of the Word' not only failed to make Ireland Protestant but has left the land in a state of trouble from which she may never recover.

Act of Union and Partition

Persecutions and troubles continued during the 17th and 18th centuries with bloody fighting and growing discontent. In AD 1800 the British government enacted an 'Act of Union,' bringing Ireland into the United Kingdom. During the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries Britain had sought to 'plant' Ireland with 'Protestant' settlers, mostly Presbyterians from Scotland and Methodists from England and Wales. It was the fact that these people needed protection that brought about the Act of Union. It should be noted that, during the years 1600 to 1921, Roman Catholics and dissenters (mostly Presbyterian and Methodist) suffered under England's rule. Finally in the year 1921, Ireland was offered 'home rule' (the right of self-government). In order, however, to effect a settlement between the Roman Catholic Irish and the Anglo-Protestant Irish (who had no desire to sever their connection with the British throne), Ireland was 'partitioned,' and a dividing 'border' erected between the predominantly Protestant area in the north, commonly known as Ulster, and the predominantly Roman Catholic region in the south, which gave itself the name Republic of Ireland or Eire. This remains the state of the island today, with Ulster in a state of near civil war. The battle is between Republicans (those who seek full Irish unity) and Loyalists (those loyal to the British crown). Behind all this lies the ancient battle between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Northern Ireland Today

Ulster, or Northern Ireland, comprises today some one-sixth of the total area of the island but contains over one-third of the total population (one and a half million), 55% of whom identify themselves as Protestant. (This group includes almost everyone apart from Roman Catholics.) The Republic of Ireland, on the other hand, comprises five-sixths of the total area of land but contains only two-thirds of the total population (three million), 95% of whom adhere to the Roman Catholic faith.

Any missionary to Ireland must quickly learn this history in order to understand the people here. God has always had His own elect people in Ireland since the days of Patrick and even today Christ still has a part of His church in Ireland. It is our prayer that, despite the troubles here, God in His mercy will continue to gather His people from among this divided nation, just as He calls His church from among all the other nations under heaven.

As each individual member of the church of Christ cannot exist independently of the full body of the church, so the church in each land and nation depends on the parts in other lands and nations to support and keep it alive. The Protestant Reformed Churches of America have, by God's guidance, been called to lift up the 'ancient standard' of gospel truth among the people of this island (Isaiah 62:10). Our hope is that with this background you will continue to pray for us. We covet those prayers and we promise that, with the help and in the will of our heavenly Father, we will do all we can to see that 'standard' held high in Ballymena, in Ulster and in all the United Kingdom.

Notes

1. Writing about Ireland in *Early Scottish Church History*, the author Rev James McLauchlin, says: "The Romans knew something of the country... calling it Hibernia, or Juverna, It was also known by the name of Scotia or Scotland. It was not till the 10th century that the present Scotland was called Scotia, being distinguished from Ireland then as Scotia Minor, while the latter was called Scotia Major. Hence the curious fact, which sounds like an Irish-ism, that Ireland was the first Scotland and the first Scotsmen were Irishmen (!!!)"
2. *Erin* or *Eire*: Gaelic for Ireland. *Erin* denotes the island as a whole, while *Eire* demotes the 'incomplete island' or southern portion.

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