

BOOK REVIEW
THE CELTIC WAY OF EVANGELISM
by George C. Hunter III
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000)

For someone who knew nothing more about Patrick than an annual celebration with shamrocks and corned beef and cabbage, this book was an eye-opening adventure in acquiring a new hero of the faith. Patrick's real historical achievements are almost mythical in proportion. In fact, the story of his conversion and call to the missionary task in Ireland are surrealistic. It must be difficult for the historian to filter through the inevitable accretion of myth to get down to supportable fact—indeed it is likely impossible to be sure on all points. But Hunter's treatment of Patrick appears to bear the appropriate marks of scholarly restraint and appropriate documentation.

When Patrick invaded Ireland with the Gospel, it was one of the most daunting mission fields one could imagine. The country was thoroughly pagan, and terribly unstable in terms of public safety and national unity. Therefore, the lives of the missionaries were in constant danger, mere physical survival was a struggle, and finding ways to authentically connect with the souls of the people required risky contextualization. Patrick showed himself to be a bold and creative pioneer of missionary method—so bold that he alarmed the authorities of the Church at Rome. Hunter has selected Patrick as a propitious model for the contemporary task of contextualizing the Gospel to Western postmodernism. The parallels are marked. Thus, Hunter's subtitle: *How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again.*"

Patrick touched the shores of Ireland as "history's first missionary bishop" with his missionary team in A. D. 432. His initial advantage was linguistic: he knew the language from his season of slavery in Ireland, and the 150 tribes of Ireland had a unified language. There were also some "fullness of times" advantages: 1) Druidism was a secret religion and the openness of Christianity appealed to the masses, 2) Ireland had been isolated from competing religious ideas for a thousand years, so the people did not have a tradition of suspicion—they were open to listening to the claims of Christianity, and 3) the stories and heroism of Scripture culturally connected with the Irish cultural traditions, and, curiously, their fascination with triads prepared them for easy acceptance of the Trinity.

But the main genius of Patrick's success is in his method (not to minimize his heart for these people!). He built ministry teams. For too long our modern missions movement has relied on the isolated missionary individual or couple. Only recently has there been a resurgence of the practice of a multidisciplinary team. Patrick brought people not only the words of the Gospel. He brought them a "picture" of the Gospel. If a local tribal chieftain granted them permission, the missionary band would set up communal living quarters adjacent to the Irish village. They would live out Christ in the view of the people and seek to engage them in the community of the Gospel. If God blessed their witness with converts, there would be baptisms and the construction of a church. God blessed this approach with stunning results. Within his lifetime, his mission

produced 700 churches, the ordination of 1000 priests, and the Christianization of 30-40 (or more) of Ireland's 150 tribes. Patrick himself wrote these stirring words:

“...this is why it come about in Ireland that people who had no acquaintance with God...are recently...made a people of the Lord and are known as children of God...For God gave me such grace, that many people through me were reborn to God and afterward confirmed and brought to perfection.”

Hunter calls these communities of faith, “monastic communities.” It is here that Hunter finds the deepest lesson for modern evangelism. It was a place of safety and a place of community in contrast to America's ideal of the rugged individualist. It was a place where life was addressed not only in empirical and transcendent terms, but also at the “middle level” of life--what Heibert calls the “Excluded Middle”-- the realm of life at which people deal with fears, emotions, and the uncertainties of life. For example, Irish prayers were developed for such commonplace tasks as starting a fire and singing a baby to sleep. These practical communities offered something to the barbarians that we have not offered in our evangelism and missions. They offered a place of *belonging* before *belief*. We have followed the Roman Evangelism Model in three logical steps: 1) Presentation, 2) Decision, 3) Fellowship. The Celtic model turns this on its head: 1) Fellowship, 2) Ministry and Conversations, 3) Belief, Invitation to Commitment. Hunter affirms the superiority of the Celtic model with today's “boomer” generation, and more-so with the “busters.” His research, as also other cited studies, reveals that,

“...many new believers report that the experience of the fellowship *enabled* them to believe and to commit. For many people, the faith is about three-fourths caught and one-fourth taught.” (54)

Hunter finds helpful lessons for today in the communication practices of Patrick's mission. The Irish sought in any messenger something they called “the authentic sign.” This “sign” is that intangible thing that creates connection between speaker and listener, that thing that creates and sustains credibility. In view of the extant conventional wisdom that the Irish were an unreachable people group, this was an advantage that Patrick desperately needed. This “authentic sign” is what Aristotle called “ethos.” It has to do with the listener's conviction that the speaker is authentically “for” the listener. Additionally, the speaker must convince the audience that he is “with” them, i.e., that he identifies with them, indeed has become *one of them*, as Thomas Cahill notes, “Patrick has become an Irishman.” Finally, Patrick and his team contextualized their communication. They tapped into the imagination of the Irish and their love of poetry, story, and song. He helped the Irish imagine what they could *become* through the grace of God. He used their multi-media to talk to them. In that sense, he mastered their “language”—not just the words and grammar, but the nuances of that culture's longings, dreams, and verbal iconography.

In the final chapter, Hunter applies the Celtic mission of Patrick to the reaching of the West. He sees many similarities: apparent unreachability, intuitiveness, suspicion, and detribalization. He believes that it is time for the Celtic model to be put back into play. This means a church emphasis on hospitality, on conversation (rather than one-way communication), and giving seekers the time and freedom to “kick the tires” as they

check out Christianity. Just the fact that a seeker crosses a cultural barrier in coming to a church service is huge, and we had better make sure that we don't bobble the opportunity. We need to anticipate their visit and ensure that they will feel welcome, wanted, and not pressured. We must be strategic like Patrick was because, in our own way, we are now trying to reach our own generation of postmodern "New Barbarians." Churches are seeing this approach yield fruit especially "twenty- and thirty-somethings." They come for relationships and over a year or two come to faith. They are *loved into faith* in an authentic community of God's people. They see the unsurpassability (the *ethos*) of living Christianity before they connect with the doctrine (the *logos*).

Timothy G. Walton
May 20, 2005