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THE FOOTSTEPS OF PATRICK A brief account of the work of God in Ireland over the last 1500 years

by Rev. Ivan Foster.

The Gospel of Christ came to Ireland over 1500 years ago. Despite many attempts by Satan and his agents God has been pleased to maintain His truth in this land. Following its first planting the Gospel was carried by men whose hearts the Lord had touched into many neighbouring countries: Scotland, England, Wales, France, Germany, Switzerland and further. God has been pleased, in some measure, to do again in these latter days what He did in those distant days. May the land, now associated with terror and strife, become known again by the title it was then given, "The land of Saints and Scholars."

The history of the Gospel in Ireland begins, to a very real degree, with the story of Patrick. There is much written about Patrick that is entirely fictitious. We can, however, be reasonably sure concerning his faith in Christ and the doctrines that he preached. There exist today two of his writings accepted by all scholars. One is his Confession. From his Confession we learn that his father was a deacon, the son of Potitus, a gospel minister. Where Patrick was actually born is something of a mystery. England, Scotland, Wales and even France all claim to be the place of his birth. In his Confession he tells us that he came from a village called Bonavem Taberniae. Where that village was is difficult now to say. It would appear that the most likely place was somewhere in Roman Britain. Very possibly he came from a place now called Kilpatrick, that is, the 'Church of Patrick', near Dumbarten in the Firth of Clyde, in Scotland.

A real life prodigal

At the age of sixteen Patrick was taken captive by Irish raiders and sold as a slave in Ireland. Slemish mountain in Co. Antrim, in the northern part of Ireland, was where he tended the flocks of sheep of the one who became his master. Wherever he was born there is one thing we can be sure of and that is he was born again in Ireland. It was there that the wayward youth repented and sought the God of his fathers and received Christ by simple faith. After a period of slavery he managed to escape and return home. But he was not to remain there very long. For it was there, like Paul, he received a call. He had a remarkable dream in which he saw a man coming to him from Ireland, whose name was Victorious, carrying with him letters and the letters began with the heading 'The voice of the Irish' and as he began to read one of the letters he heard a voice that cried: "We entreat thee holy youth to come and walk henceforth among us." Patrick took this to be the call of God and so returned to the land where once he had been a slave, but now he came as a preacher of the gospel to set men free from the darkness that enslaved this land.

Success

He had great success in the preaching of the Gospel. Many churches were started and many thousands were won to Christ. His preaching career covered a period of time in the



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mid-fifth century. He is believed to be buried in Downpatrick a small town in Co. Down, Northern Ireland. It is important to understand that though the Roman Catholic Church today claims him as her apostle to Ireland and his name and his statues adorn many of the great Roman Catholic mass houses in Ireland there is nothing more clear than that Patrick's theology was as far removed from Popery as Heaven is from Hell. It is a simple matter of reading his confession and one will see that Rome's claim that he came to Ireland as an emissary of the Pope is entirely false. Neither is it true to say that Patrick was responsible for organising a church in Ireland that was prelatic in its organisation. Patrick claims in his writings to have established 365 churches in Ireland appointing 365 bishops or one bishop for each church. It is clear that far from following episcopalianism Patrick followed primitive Bible Christianity or what is commonly called today Presbyterianism.

Although Ireland sank down into that same darkness that engulfed the rest of Europe during that period which became known as the Dark Ages, the decline was not as rapid as it was elsewhere. The gospel light was shining still in Ireland with remarkable clarity when it had greatly dimmed in many other European countries. From Ireland there went out many great missionary preachers. Among them was Columba who centred his activities in Iona, an island off the west coast of Scotland. Columbanus went to preach in France. Gallus one of the disciples of Columbanus, became a well known evangelist in Switzerland. Another preacher of the Gospel with Irish origins was Killen. He evangelised in the Warzburg area of Germany and in another part of Germany a work was carried on by a preacher called "Fridolin the Traveller".

Sadly, Ireland also succumbed to the advancing darkness of Romanism. One event that established Rome in Ireland was the invitation of Pope Adrian IV to the English King, Henry II, to invade Ireland and bring it into submission to the English crown and thus into submission to the Pope of Rome. In the light of the present political campaign in Northern Ireland, it is essential that we bear in mind that England first became politically involved in Ireland at the invitation of the Pope. It is ironic that the very system which gives birth to anti-English feelings through its schools and churches and which in turn is responsible for the fanaticism of Roman Catholic terrorism, should have been responsible for the invasion of Ireland by the English in the first place. When England served the cause of the Pope it was welcome in Ireland. But once England became Protestant she was labelled the wicked invader. Such is the lying deceit of Romanism.

From darkness to light

From the time of the English occupation to the Reformation, Ireland sank down into great darkness, a darkness that was accompanied, not unnaturally, by great want and deprivation. It became a land of misery and hardship. The North East of Ireland, because of the very narrow channel of sea between it and Scotland, always had the closest links with that land. It was not uncommon for a movement to take place between the two lands in both directions by large numbers of people during times of hardship and famine in either country. Consequently, when the gospel was established in Scotland during the days of John Knox, the light which shone so brightly in Scotland was soon carried over to Ireland. The natural movement from Scotland to Northern Ireland greatly accelerated in the early part of the seventeenth century when it became the policy of the English crown to "plant" loyal Protestant citizens from Scotland and England in North East Ireland in order to stabilise the



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country. This early plantation laid the foundation for the strong Protestant presence that exists still in the Northern province of Ireland, commonly called Ulster. John Knox through his contacts with John Calvin in Geneva instituted a Presbyterian and Calvinistic Church in Scotland. The Scottish planters in Ulster carried over their reformed doctrines and soon Presbyterianism in Ireland, despite much opposition, took firm root. From the early seventeenth century right up until the present day God has been pleased to maintain a pure witness to the Gospel. There have been many attempts to exterminate the Church of Christ in Ulster. Anti-Presbyterian laws made life extremely difficult for our forefathers. This was one of the main factors that caused so many Ulster Protestants to leave and go to America. There they played a major role in the struggle for independence giving to George Washington his best soldiers. It is indicative of the part they played in the founding of that great nation that the man who printed the Declaration of Independence and the first man who signed it were Ulster men.

Massacre

Rome also kept up her hatred and in 1641 and again in 1688-90 and again in 1798 and on numerous other lesser occasions that hatred burst forth into massacre. In 1641 over 25,000 Protestants were slaughtered by Romanists with the full blessing of their church and priests. Legal testimonies, collected by a Government Inquiry into the massacre, still exist in the archives of Trinity College, Dublin.

Revival

There were many times, because of spiritual declension, that the light of truth grew dim, but God was pleased to send revival in great abundance. In the late 1630's, again in the 1700's and in the unparalleled outpouring of the Spirit in 1859, Ireland was visited with many tokens of Divine favour. Even in this twentieth century, in the early 1920's, many thousands of souls were saved under the revival ministry of the Rev W. P. Nicholson, a Presbyterian evangelist. There is little doubt that the early days of the Free Presbyterian Church were days of revival. In the early '50's and again in the mid '60's right up until the '70's, under the preaching of Dr Paisley and other Free Presbyterian ministers, God was pleased to advance the Gospel and many congregations were formed from amongst converts to the Gospel at that time.

Separation from apostasy

The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster is a Secession Church. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland had gradually slipped away from an adherence to the truth and gone down into apostasy. In the 1920's and '30's the Rev W. P. Nicholson gave a warning then of the increasing signs of unfaithfulness in the pulpits of the Presbyterian Church. A lecturer in the Presbyterian College, Professor J. E. Davy, was tried for heresy and despite the clear evidence of his guilt he was exonerated. He later was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The signs of apostasy became all too clear. Dr. Ian Paisley, then a young minister in an independent evangelical Church in Belfast was invited to conduct a Gospel mission in the Presbyterian Church in Crossgar, Co Down.



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Other Presbyterian Churches in the district objected to this invitation because of Ian Paisley's condemnation of the modernistic trends within the Presbyterian Church. As a result of these objections, the local Presbytery of the Church met and refused to give permission for the mission to go ahead. Some elders of the Crossgar Presbyterian Church withdrew from that Church and went ahead with the mission in a local mission hall and formed themselves together into the first Free Presbyterian congregation. Since the formation of that first congregation on 17th March 1951, God has been pleased to add over 50 congregations to that work in Ulster. As well as that the work has spread into Scotland, into England, into Wales, into Australia, into the United States of America and into Canada. It has also spread into Germany.

Doctrine

The doctrines of our Church, the government of our Church are based upon the Word of God. It can be traced back through our revivalist forefathers and our reforming forefathers to the days of Patrick and his evangelism, back to the days of the Apostles, back to the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Head and King of the Church. As we remain faithful to these truths we can expect to see the great blessings poured out in the past poured out upon us today.

"We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old." Psalm 44:1.

"Wilt Thou not revive us again: that Thy people may rejoice in Thee." Psalm 85:6.