“And Your Daughters Shall Prophesy”—The Revival Legacy of Aimee Semple McPherson

BY GARY B. MCGEE

EDITOR’S NOTE: “Lord Send A Revival” (Psalm 85:6) is the
Assemblies of God theme for 1997. To give special emphasis to the
theme, beginning with this issue of Enrichment and in the next
three issues, we will publish articles on four of history’s great
revivalist. You will read inspiring accounts on the lives of
Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Smith Wigglesworth. We
begin the series with this article on Aimee Semple McPherson.

The headlines declared: “Cripples Are Cured When Woman Evangelist
Prays,” and “Sick of Soul and Body Are Relieved.” Canton, Ohio,
had never seen anything like an Aimee Semple McPherson campaign
before, and neither had my grandmother who was baptized in the
Holy Spirit and brought her family into Pentecost. “Sister,” as
Aimee came to be known, arrived with scarcely any advance
planning. So little in fact that her recent convert and associate
Charles S. Price—soon to become a well-known evangelist
himself—had to play the piano during the services. Testimonies of
salvation and remarkable healings circulated in the city. For 2
1/2 weeks people packed the civic auditorium. Two daily newspapers
printed the name and address of each person healed. Who could ask
for better publicity?

Refusing to preach Jesus Christ as the great “I was,” she
proclaimed Him as “the same yesterday, and today, and forever”
(Hebrews 13:8). Like other Pentecostals, she believed that only
unbelief separated believers from seeing New Testament signs and
wonders. The startling attention given to the miraculous drew the
interest of the ministerial alliance whose members soon took their
seats on the platform behind her. So impressed by the
manifestations of supernatural power that he observed, the pastor
of the prestigious First Methodist Church invited her to preach on
a Sunday. Charles S. Price received a similar invitation from
First Congregational Church. At the close of the campaign, over
3,000 conversions were recorded.

Aimee’s methods of evangelism, especially the priority she placed
on prayer for the sick, contrasted sharply with those of
Evangelist Billy Sunday who had been there 9 years earlier. His
campaigns resembled patriotic victory rallies more than rescue
operations to save perishing sinners. While Sunday’s view of
evangelism fit comfortably with the cultural values of
middle-class America, Aimee’s barnstorming techniques—a reflection of her early experience in the Salvation Army—and expectancy of signs and wonders demonstrated the distinctive Pentecostal approach to evangelism.

HANDMAIDEN OF THE LORD
Throughout her ministry Aimee retold the dramatic story of her life under the announced title, “From Milkpail to Pulpit.” Thousands listened eagerly as she told of her Methodist father and Salvation Army mother and life in the 1890s on their small farm near Ingersoll, Ontario, Canada. Audiences were charmed by her courtship and marriage to Robert Semple, a Scotch-Irish evangelist, and their journey to Hong Kong as missionaries. Listeners mourned with her as she told of his untimely death from malaria in 1910 and of the lonely return to America with their first child, Roberta Star, born 6 weeks after Robert’s passing. They felt Aimee’s struggle over whether to obey God’s call until lying on her deathbed she heard a voice say, “Now will you go?” She related her eagerness as a simple handmaiden to work for Jesus in any way possible. She showed her commitment by driving tent stakes into the ground to set up tents for revival meetings, spending hours around the altars praying with seekers, feeding and clothing the hungry in Los Angeles, debating atheists, lending a hand in disaster-relief efforts, and selling war bonds during World War II. Her listeners empathized with the stings of persecution and criticism that came her way. With the threads of her story woven together, she then invited the unsaved to surrender their lives to Christ and challenged believers to commit themselves to His service.

CREATIVE COMMUNICATOR
In the Roaring Twenties, when mainstream Christians despised Pentecostals, Aimee Semple McPherson became North America’s best-known evangelist. Denominational clergy and laity flocked to her services. On January 1, 1923, she opened Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, California, one of the first megachurches in the United States with many satellite congregations. Embellished with eight large stained glass windows, 5,300 seats and two balconies, and sporting the largest unsupported dome in North America at the time, she dedicated it debt free, paid for by thousands of gifts from Protestants of almost every stripe.

In the same year, she founded the Lighthouse of International Foursquare Evangelism, now known as LIFE Bible College, to prepare Spirit-filled pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. In the years when Pentecostal Bible institutes struggled for survival, LIFE started in a new building constructed next to the Temple. Frank C.
Thompson, then retired from Methodist ministry and editor of the popular *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*, taught Bible subjects and served as honorary dean. Although not a Pentecostal, Thompson shared Aimee’s enthusiasm for divine healing. Aimee cherished unity and cooperation with other Christians.

What made her ministry so effective? First, Aimee promoted interdenominational evangelism, a priority inscribed on the cornerstone of Angelus Temple. Despite gaining ordination as a Baptist minister, licensing as a Methodist exhorter, and credentials for a short time with the Assemblies of God as an evangelist, she refused to limit her ministry to narrowly defined constituencies. Aimee boldly carried her “Foursquare Gospel” (Jesus as Savior, Healer, Baptizer, and Coming King) wherever she went.

Second, Aimee’s understanding of the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit enriched her creative talents. She understood American culture and saw it as a bridge to take the gospel to humanity. Aimee took advantage of visual and audio means of communication. She became famous for her illustrated sermons, her written and produced sacred operas, and for founding KFSG, one of the oldest religious radio stations in the country. The result? Thousands visited Angelus Temple or heard her on the radio and came to Christ.

**PROPHETIC WITNESS**

Aimee used cultural modes for Christian witness but not uncritically. On one occasion when hundreds of Ku Klux Klan members entered the Temple and expected her blessing, she denounced their racism as contrary to the gospel. Even though the productions of her illustrated sermons had a Hollywood flavor (Charlie Chaplin reportedly gave advice on stage arrangements), Aimee was quick to denounce the vices of society: alcoholism, white slavery (prostitution), drug addiction, and anything else that kept people in the chains of sin. She also attacked police corruption—publicly denouncing corrupt officers by name—having recognized that evil in human structures crushes innocent and law-abiding citizens. Not surprisingly, the Los Angeles criminal underworld hated her. In Winnipeg and other cities, she courageously visited houses of prostitution, distributing New Testaments and tenderly hugging and praying with the women. Aimee also rejected the cultural norms that placed limits on women, particularly on those called to ministry. Although on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on men and women, some Pentecostals sought to restrict ministry activities of women, particularly from pulpit ministry. Aimee would have none of that. Undoubtedly, she had been influenced by other prominent women
including Evangeline Booth, Salvation Army commander for Canada, and Maria B. Woodworth-Etter, the well-known evangelist whose ministry spanned the decades from the 1880s to the 1920s. In turn, Aimee became a model for other women ministers to follow, including Kathryn Kuhlman. With equal rights given to women in 1919, Aimee’s ministry reflected the seemingly boundless opportunities that women could have in serving God.

A LEGACY OF NEW CHURCHES
While many have remembered “Sister McPherson” for her successful evangelism, for the well-known account of her kidnapping in 1926, and as founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, her contribution to the planting of new churches still remains largely unheralded. In the wake of her campaigns across the nation, hundreds and probably thousands of Pentecostal congregations took root with some remaining independent and others joining the Foursquare Church, the Assemblies of God, and other new networks of churches. Whether preaching and praying for the sick in Denver, Wichita, Philadelphia, or Toronto, revival followed. The impact of her campaigns also jump-started growth for many small, struggling Pentecostal churches.

Aimee’s influence spread abroad through overseas crusades and the fruitful ministries of dedicated Foursquare missionaries. Today, few are aware that a letter from the United States to Gheorghe Bradin describing Aimee’s ministry and telling of the baptism in the Holy Spirit initially sparked the great Pentecostal revival in Romania.

THE REST OF THE STORY
Aimee’s journey “From Milkpail to Pulpit”—with its drama and pathos, its triumphs and failures, its laughter and tears—held her listeners at the edge of their seats. In a sense it resembled their stories too or at least one they wished for themselves. But while she inspired their imaginations, she couldn’t share the rest of the story perhaps because Christians prefer porcelain heros who seem to lack the imperfections of their admirers. Adoration turns to disdain, however, when a chip is found. “Throw it away,” they say; “it’s worthless.”

At times, Aimee’s public persona masked painful loneliness. In 1911, a year after returning from China, she married divorcé Harold McPherson who appeared to offer her the security she needed. Two years later she gave birth to their son, Rolf. Domestic constraints soon frustrated her intense burden for evangelism. When Harold agreed to travel with her in evangelistic ministry, she thought she had the best of both worlds. However, Aimee was far more gifted. In the end, he couldn’t live under the
shadow of her growing fame and filed for divorce just as she
reached the pinnacle of her ministry.

In the aftermath of her kidnapping in 1926, Aimee’s energies were
consumed by her grueling schedule (sometimes preaching and
teaching 21 times a week). The subsequent court case, negative
publicity, and mounting financial troubles contributed to her
suffering a nervous breakdown in 1930. Family relationships also
turned sour when she became estranged from those closest to her,
namely her mother and daughter. She also foolishly entered into a
marriage with musician David Hutton that she hoped would bring
happiness. It proved to be doomed from the start. Finally, her
healing ministry declined in the late twenties, an acute
humiliation for any healing evangelist to face. To make matters
worse, newspapers eagerly gave front-page coverage to every
mistake she made and every tidbit of gossip they could find. Aimee
had more than her fair share of sorrows but discovered the
sufficiency of God’s grace (2 Corinthians 12:9)—God’s love is the
greatest sign and wonder of all.

The anointed ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson did not exempt
her from temptations and human failings. Like preachers past and
present, there were occasions when she proclaimed more radical
things about Christian discipleship from the pulpit than she
modeled. Spirit-filled clergy have no less immunity to problems
than anyone else. In addition, comfort within the culture can
easily distort one’s perceptions of themselves and their ministry.
As with Aimee, every Christian has blind spots and weaknesses that
add a certain level of jeopardy to their best intentions of
serving God.

For Aimee, successes in ministry as well as difficulties in
personal relationships presented the greatest challenges to her
integrity. Since her death in 1944, other Pentecostal ministers
have wrestled with the same issues of success, pride, and
relationships—some have failed. Few have risen from the ashes as
well as Aimee Semple McPherson to continue making contributions to
the kingdom of God.

With a twinkle in her eye, my grandmother often reminisced about
the glory and power of God in “Sister’s” ministry. For her and
many others, Aimee bequeathed a revival legacy that points to what
God can do through His servants who remain faithful to their
calling and allow the Spirit to enrich their creative gifts. When
remembering the grace of God in his own life, Paul wisely reminded
his critical Corinthian friends that “we have this treasure in
earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God,
and not of us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Recommended Reading and Listening:
By Aimee Semple McPherson:

This Is That (Los Angeles: Foursquare Publications, 1923; reprinted in 1996).


About Aimee Semple McPherson:


Audio cassette recordings of her sermons may be purchased from Foursquare Publications, P.O. Box 26902, 1910 W. Sunset Blvd. #200, Los Angeles, CA 90026-0176.

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