

1 *Enrichment*

2
3 **"And Your Daughters Shall Prophesy"—The Revival Legacy of Aimee**
4 **Semple McPherson**

5
6 BY GARY B. MCGEE

7
8 *EDITOR'S NOTE: "Lord Send A Revival" (Psalm 85:6) is the*
9 *Assemblies of God theme for 1997. To give special emphasis to the*
10 *theme, beginning with this issue of Enrichment and in the next*
11 *three issues, we will publish articles on four of history's great*
12 *revivalist. You will read inspiring accounts on the lives of*
13 *Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Smith Wigglesworth. We*
14 *begin the series with this article on Aimee Semple McPherson.*
15

16 The headlines declared: "Cripples Are Cured When Woman Evangelist
17 Prays," and "Sick of Soul and Body Are Relieved." Canton, Ohio,
18 had never seen anything like an Aimee Semple McPherson campaign
19 before, and neither had my grandmother who was baptized in the
20 Holy Spirit and brought her family into Pentecost. "Sister," as
21 Aimee came to be known, arrived with scarcely any advance
22 planning. So little in fact that her recent convert and associate
23 Charles S. Price—soon to become a well-known evangelist
24 himself—had to play the piano during the services. Testimonies of
25 salvation and remarkable healings circulated in the city. For 2
26 1/2 weeks people packed the civic auditorium. Two daily newspapers
27 printed the name and address of each person healed. Who could ask
28 for better publicity?

29 Refusing to preach Jesus Christ as the great "I was," she
30 proclaimed Him as "the same yesterday, and today, and forever"
31 (Hebrews 13:8). Like other Pentecostals, she believed that only
32 unbelief separated believers from seeing New Testament signs and
33 wonders. The startling attention given to the miraculous drew the
34 interest of the ministerial alliance whose members soon took their
35 seats on the platform behind her. So impressed by the
36 manifestations of supernatural power that he observed, the pastor
37 of the prestigious First Methodist Church invited her to preach on
38 a Sunday. Charles S. Price received a similar invitation from
39 First Congregational Church. At the close of the campaign, over
40 3,000 conversions were recorded.

41 Aimee's methods of evangelism, especially the priority she placed
42 on prayer for the sick, contrasted sharply with those of
43 Evangelist Billy Sunday who had been there 9 years earlier. His
44 campaigns resembled patriotic victory rallies more than rescue
45 operations to save perishing sinners. While Sunday's view of
46 evangelism fit comfortably with the cultural values of

47 middle-class America, Aimee's barnstorming techniques—a reflection
48 of her early experience in the Salvation Army—and expectancy of
49 signs and wonders demonstrated the distinctive Pentecostal
50 approach to evangelism.

51

52 **HANDMAIDEN OF THE LORD**

53 Throughout her ministry Aimee retold the dramatic story of her
54 life under the announced title, "From Milkpail to Pulpit."
55 Thousands listened eagerly as she told of her Methodist father and
56 Salvation Army mother and life in the 1890s on their small farm
57 near Ingersoll, Ontario, Canada. Audiences were charmed by her
58 courtship and marriage to Robert Semple, a Scotch-Irish
59 evangelist, and their journey to Hong Kong as missionaries.
60 Listeners mourned with her as she told of his untimely death from
61 malaria in 1910 and of the lonely return to America with their
62 first child, Roberta Star, born 6 weeks after Robert's passing.

63 They felt Aimee's struggle over whether to obey God's call until
64 lying on her deathbed she heard a voice say, "Now will you go?"
65 She related her eagerness as a simple handmaiden to work for Jesus
66 in any way possible. She showed her commitment by driving tent
67 stakes into the ground to set up tents for revival meetings,
68 spending hours around the altars praying with seekers, feeding and
69 clothing the hungry in Los Angeles, debating atheists, lending a
70 hand in disaster-relief efforts, and selling war bonds during
71 World War II. Her listeners empathized with the stings of
72 persecution and criticism that came her way. With the threads of
73 her story woven together, she then invited the unsaved to
74 surrender their lives to Christ and challenged believers to commit
75 themselves to His service.

76

77 **CREATIVE COMMUNICATOR**

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

88 In the same year, she founded the Lighthouse of International
89 Foursquare Evangelism, now known as LIFE Bible College, to prepare
90 Spirit-filled pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. In the years
91 when Pentecostal Bible institutes struggled for survival, LIFE
92 started in a new building constructed next to the Temple. Frank C.

93 Thompson, then retired from Methodist ministry and editor of the
94 popular *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*, taught Bible subjects and
95 served as honorary dean. Although not a Pentecostal, Thompson
96 shared Aimee's enthusiasm for divine healing. Aimee cherished
97 unity and cooperation with other Christians.

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

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

116

117 **PROPHETIC WITNESS**

118 Aimee used cultural modes for Christian witness but not
119 uncritically. On one occasion when hundreds of Ku Klux Klan
120 members entered the Temple and expected her blessing, she
121 denounced their racism as contrary to the gospel. Even though the
122 productions of her illustrated sermons had a Hollywood flavor
123 (Charlie Chaplin reportedly gave advice on stage arrangements),
124 Aimee was quick to denounce the vices of society: alcoholism,
125 white slavery (prostitution), drug addiction, and anything else
126 that kept people in the chains of sin. She also attacked police
127 corruption—publicly denouncing corrupt officers by name—having
128 recognized that evil in human structures crushes innocent and law-
129 abiding citizens. Not surprisingly, the Los Angeles criminal
130 underworld hated her. In Winnipeg and other cities, she
131 courageously visited houses of prostitution, distributing New
132 Testaments and tenderly hugging and praying with the women.

133 Aimee also rejected the cultural norms that placed limits on
134 women, particularly on those called to ministry. Although on the
135 Day of Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on men and women, some
136 Pentecostals sought to restrict ministry activities of women,
137 particularly from pulpit ministry. Aimee would have none of that.
138 Undoubtedly, she had been influenced by other prominent women

139 including Evangeline Booth, Salvation Army commander for Canada,
140 and Maria B. Woodworth-Etter, the well-known evangelist whose
141 ministry spanned the decades from the 1880s to the 1920s. In turn,
142 Aimee became a model for other women ministers to follow,
143 including Kathryn Kuhlman. With equal rights given to women in
144 1919, Aimee's ministry reflected the seemingly boundless
145 opportunities that women could have in serving God.

146

147 **A LEGACY OF NEW CHURCHES**

148 While many have remembered "Sister McPherson" for her successful
149 evangelism, for the well-known account of her kidnapping in 1926,
150 and as founder of the International Church of the Foursquare
151 Gospel, her contribution to the planting of new churches still
152 remains largely unheralded. In the wake of her campaigns across
153 the nation, hundreds and probably thousands of Pentecostal
154 congregations took root with some remaining independent and others
155 joining the Foursquare Church, the Assemblies of God, and other
156 new networks of churches. Whether preaching and praying for the
157 sick in Denver, Wichita, Philadelphia, or Toronto, revival
158 followed. The impact of her campaigns also jump-started growth for
159 many small, struggling Pentecostal churches.

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

166

167 **THE REST OF THE STORY**

168 Aimee's journey "From Milkpail to Pulpit"—with its drama and
169 pathos, its triumphs and failures, its laughter and tears—held her
170 listeners at the edge of their seats. In a sense it resembled
171 their stories too or at least one they wished for themselves. But
172 while she inspired their imaginations, she couldn't share the rest
173 of the story perhaps because Christians prefer porcelain heroes who
174 seem to lack the imperfections of their admirers. Adoration turns
175 to disdain, however, when a chip is found. "Throw it away," they
176 say; "it's worthless."

177 At times, Aimee's public persona masked painful loneliness. In
178 1911, a year after returning from China, she married divorcé
179 Harold McPherson who appeared to offer her the security she
180 needed. Two years later she gave birth to their son, Rolf.
181 Domestic constraints soon frustrated her intense burden for
182 evangelism. When Harold agreed to travel with her in evangelistic
183 ministry, she thought she had the best of both worlds. However,
184 Aimee was far more gifted. In the end, he couldn't live under the

185 shadow of her growing fame and filed for divorce just as she
186 reached the pinnacle of her ministry.

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

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

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

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

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230 Recommended Reading and Listening:

231
232 By Aimee Semple McPherson:
233
234 *This Is That* (Los Angeles: Foursquare Publications, 1923;
235 reprinted in 1996).
236
237 *Aimee: The Life Story of Aimee Semple McPherson* (Los Angeles:
238 Foursquare Publications, 1979).
239
240 About Aimee Semple McPherson:
241
242 Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister*
243 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993).
244
245 Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple*
246 *McPherson* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993).
247
248 Audio cassette recordings of her sermons may be purchased from
249 Foursquare Publications, P.O. Box 26902, 1910 W. Sunset Blvd.
250 #200, Los Angeles, CA 90026-0176.
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