Aimee S. McPherson: Evangelist of the City

AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON once said, "Right at the outset, there was borne in upon me the realization that the methods so often used to impart religion were too archaic, too sedate, and too lifeless ever to capture the interest of the throngs." That she departed from these archaic, sedate, and lifeless methods no one in Los Angeles will deny. Her Sunday night church services at Angelus Temple were extravaganzas, which always featured a brass band. Sometimes her services were nothing more than vaudeville routines; sometimes colorful pagentry was emphasized; but all of them were highlighted by an "illustrated sermon."

Some of her illustrated sermons showed action upon a stage in which cardboard boats on a turbulent sea were dashed upon the rocks at the base of a lighthouse, or children were dressed in costumes portraying the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. Whatever form the illustrated sermon took, the pastor was always on stage delivering a running commentary. Because her church services were sensational, a Sunday night at Angelus Temple soon became a regular stop for planned sightseeing tours in Los Angeles.

All of the available evidence, including the personal testimony of the many people who heard "Sister" McPherson preach, supports the conclusion that she was an effective speaker. Why was she effective with the method of preaching that she used? A partial answer might be found in her background, the nature of her audiences, and the doctrine which she preached. From these her choice of materials, her oral style, and her techniques of delivery evolved.

The childhood of the evangelist contributed influences which instilled in her a "fundamentalist" religious background. Her mother believed that God had sent Aimee in answer to a prayer for a girl to preach His word. Aimee's mother was an ardent worker for the Salvation Army Mission and Aimee was bundled there even when a tiny baby. As a result of her mother's tutoring, young Aimee learned her Bible stories so well that at the age of five she could rise and tell many of them "when asked to do so."
Her early environment also provided her with opportunities to develop her speaking talent. The Methodist Church offered many occasions for her to try her ability at elocution and dramatics. When she was seventeen, Aimee was converted by and married to the evangelist Robert Semple. Semple's style of preaching influenced his wife's speaking profoundly. She traveled with her husband and was active upon the platform at all of his evangelistic meetings. The Semples were in China doing missionary work when Robert was fatally stricken with malaria. Then Aimee returned to the United States and married Harold McPherson; however, she soon chafed under routine domestic life, separated from him, and started out on her own to preach the gospel.

During the next seven years before the climactic opening of the Angelus Temple in 1923, Aimee Semple McPherson's travels included two transcontinental tours and a trip to Australia. Throughout this period she developed her successful techniques of evangelism. She learned that a woman preacher was a novelty and that this alone was an important factor in drawing people to her meetings. She learned the publicity value of unusual stunts like preaching at boxing matches or of scattering pamphlets from an airplane. She became acutely aware of "Divine Healing" as a crowd-attracting agent; and at one healing revival at Balboa Park in San Diego, California, 30,000 people were reported in attendance. In 1922 Mrs. McPherson conceived the idea of the Foursquare Gospel, and through her influence the building of the Angelus Temple was begun in Los Angeles.

Most observers of the pastor's activities in the 1920's agree that the greater part of a congregation that numbered in the thousands consisted of people who were forty years of age or over. Furthermore, "Nine out of ten of Aimee's followers were converts from orthodox Protestant creeds, migrants from small town and farming areas of the Middle West." Why was this so? One plausible explanation lies in the backgrounds of the followers themselves. The average farmer in the Middle West in the early part of the 20th century was basically a "fundamentalist" in religious belief, and as a general rule, his education was limited. Being a religious man, it was natural for him to "remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy," so he went to church on Sunday. He went there because he felt that he was discharging a sacred duty. Also, church attendance made it possible for him to escape the drudgery of farm work for a few hours, giving him a chance to meet his friends and visit. Church for this man was both a spiritual and a social experience.

In Los Angeles he found orthodox churches stiff and unfriendly; so he tried to fill the void with the commercial entertainment of the city. But the habit of many years could not be broken easily, and his desire to enjoy the solid pleasures of friendship could not be suppressed. For this man, Mrs. McPherson and her Angelus Temple held a growing attraction. Sunday night at the Temple, he found.

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was not only a time of worship, but one of entertainment, too, and a place at
which to meet new friends with habits and backgrounds similar to his.

Also many sick people were found in the Los Angeles area, some of whom
had come from the Midwest farmer group, and should be taken into account when
considering the Foursquare audiences. Mrs. McPherson held healing services on
Saturday nights. Discarded crutches and canes were placed in observable spots
throughout the Temple, and while the sick paraded the platform, the pastor prayed
for each one individually. Indeed, "Divine Healing" offered such impressive
evidence of the power of God to the lay observer in the audience that it was
known to have persuasion over whole families.

While the people from the rural Middle West and those who were "cured"
at her church accounted for a great number of Mrs. McPherson's followers, her
entire congregation did not consist of these people alone. In fact, persons from
every state in the Union have been on the membership books of Angelus Temple
at one time or another. Today, many who were followers of the evangelist when
she was alive are still members of the Temple. A sizable number of them settled
in the Echo Lake Park area in order to be near the church.

Like many members of her audience, Aimee McPherson was under a "fundamentalist" religious influence throughout the formative years of her life, and in
maturity fundamentalism continued to characterize her religious beliefs. In an era
when a dispute was in progress between the "fundamentalist" and "modernist"
churches, she was irrevocably on the side of the "fundamentalists." What was
this fundamentalism that the woman evangelist emphasized from the pulpit?
Briefly, she believed that "any doctrine that is founded upon the word of God,
rightly divided, is fundamental." The essence of her gospel is revealed in four
major tenets: "1. Jesus Christ the Savior of the Soul . . ., 2. Jesus Christ the Bapt-
Christ the Coming King. . ." These were the premises, said the evangelist,
that one must accept and believe in order to insure oneself a place in heaven, and
they were the principles which form the main doctrinal foundation for all of the
Foursquare Gospel churches.

Aimee Semple McPherson's fundamentalism was preached purposefully with
a positive approach. Her main concern was the incitement of feelings of sympathy,
joy, happiness, hope, and security in her audiences. Unlike Jonathan Edwards,
she did not use an appeal to fear as pathetic support. Of course, there were times
when she described the horrors of hell and threatened her followers with such a
fate for sinfulness; but those times were the exception. She said at one time:

Who cares about Hell, friends? We've heard about it all our lives. It's a
terrible place where nobody wants to go. I think the less we hear about Hell

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5 Ibid., p. 77.
the better, don't you? Let's forget about Hell. Lift up your hearts. What we are interested in, yes Lord, is Heaven and how to get there!\(^6\)

Most of her sermons reflected this positive attitude. She minimized the horrors of hell and emphasized the glories of heaven to her congregation. And she encouraged joyful, overt responses on the part of her listeners to the pathetic support she presented. People in her audiences would shout throughout the service with heads tilted back, eyes closed, and arms outstretched toward heaven. At times it was not uncommon for some member to interrupt the service and speak in tongues. In short, Aimee's preaching brought emotional release and excitement into rather drab lives. Hers was a doctrine well suited to her audiences.

Aimee McPherson's oral style and techniques of delivery grew naturally from her selection of materials for her sermons. These in turn were the direct product of the speaker's training, her doctrine, and the nature of the audiences to which she spoke. In order to discover the precise methods by which the evangelist succeeded in arousing her hearers, eight recorded sermons were transcribed and the content was broken down into the following categories: narration or exemplification, 57% (dialogue within narration, 19%); explanation, 22%; exhortation, 12%; direct appeal, 5%; quotation from scripture, 2.5%; and miscellaneous, 1.5%. It is evident that she used narration as her main form of support for amplification. Individual sermons showed percentages ranging from a low of forty-four to a high of seventy-eight percent. In seven of the sermons analyzed illustrations accounted for roughly fifty percent of the content. A high percentage of narration, seventy-eight, appeared in a sermon called, "From Milkpail to Pulpit."

What was the narration like? It has been aptly described by Fahrner when he said, “Many of her sermons were not much more than a series of stories within one big story.”\(^7\) The “big story” was usually a familiar one taken from the Bible, such as the Crucifixion, Noah and the Ark, or John the Baptist. The “series of stories” were dramatic and sometimes humorous illustrations thrown into context to show the audience how the theme of the sermon could be paralleled in their lives. The illustration which follows shows the evangelist to an advantage in her descriptive-narrative style:

I will never forget a story a fireman told me here. A building was on fire and they thought everyone was out of the building, but at last they discovered one woman screaming in the topmost window. The flames were billowing up; the inside of the house was an inferno. They could not go inside. Their only hope was the hook and ladder. So they sent for the ladder, ran it up outside, and gave the fireman the order to go up. Up he went through the smoke and fire, the roaring hades of flame. His clothes were smoking; his face was blistered; his eyes almost blinded. He started down.

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he couldn’t make it. As he started down, the people began to shout, “Bah! You’re a coward.”

“No, boys,” said the chief, “don’t do that. That is the way to break a man. Give him your cheer, boys. It won’t hurt you any; give him your cheer.”

They all began to cheer. “Hurrah! He can do it! He can make it!”

That boy straightened; his head came up; the poor tired eyes opened; he went up, hand over hand, round after round, till he took that woman over his shoulder. Down he came through the flame; didn’t stop till a few steps from the bottom and they caught him up and he was recovered.

In the quoted passage there are 224 words; eighty-one percent are of one syllable; twelve percent, of two; and only seven percent, three. One and two syllable words were typical of her discourse. Such simple words came within the vocabulary level of her audiences and helped make her ideas clear and understandable to them. Also such words created clear-cut imagery, keeping interest at a high pitch. The short, choppy sentences were grouped in series and made the discourse move at a rapid pace. They added to the action and excitement created by the situation in the story.

Although the pastor’s word choice and sentence structure did much to make her sermons impressive, however, when they were cast in the mold of dialogue, the ideas became personified and vital to her hearers. The illustration shows how the pastor could weave conversational exchange into narrative content. Most of her sermons were well sprinkled with dialogue. Such rhetorical technique added the realistic give-and-take of conversation as stimuli to the imagination of her listeners. Aimee’s emphasis upon narration was natural if we recall that even in her infancy she had a knack for telling Bible stories. Later on, this ability was developed to a higher degree through speaking experience. Obviously, she learned that narration through illustration was an effective means for making ideas understandable, interesting, and vivid.

Her use of explanation offers indirect evidence to show that the evangelist knew the intellectual level of her congregation. She knew when explanation was needed in order to clarify ideas. She used explication for defining words, for the interpretation of the scriptures, or for exposition of sinful practices. Sometimes she would use explanation to show the listener how the lesson taught by her sermon could be applied to his life. However, Mrs. McPherson’s most impressive use of explanatory passages was for the interpretation of the symbolism found within her homilies. An excerpt from a sermon, “The Rains Came,” offers a good example of this and shows how the doctrine of the International Church of the Four-square Gospel influenced her style.

This rainbow is a bridge, the mount to glory. The colors of the rainbow are derivatives of the four great colors, red, gold, blue and purple. The first

great sweep of the rainbow is red. It was produced by the blood of Jesus Christ as He moved his wound . . . and unveiled the thorns from top to bottom and the way made for man to come to God. . . . And upon the red of the rainbow came the great arch of this international bridge and it was of gold. . . . The next scene in the rainbow is blue, the azure, the turquoise, the Divine Healing. And the purple is the promise of the second coming when our Lord shall come back with His people and not in the clouds but back to a mountain, the Mount of Olives and His seat shall rest upon the mountain.9

Such explanation was necessary if the speaker were to connect the colors of the rainbow with the basic tenets of the Foursquare faith. However, it proved effective for reinforcing basic beliefs; and the vivid colors of the rainbow connected with the cornerstones of faith made the imagery indelible. The intellectual level of her hearers as well as the doctrine molded her spoken discourse.

The pastor was too busy carrying out the manifold duties as director of Angelus Temple to spend much time in the preparation of her speeches. This meant that for speech content she relied mainly upon her memory. While she always spoke with a brief outline at hand she practiced what she called "preaching under the anointing of the Holy Spirit."10 The evangelist believed that God gave her instant remembrance of those points pertinent to the subject — another way of saying that she had a good memory. Having used the Bible as a lifelong source of study, she could instantly quote scriptures and "her ability to do this was tremendous."11 Biblical quotations ranged up to four percent of the content of individual sermons.

Speaking with a brief outline left Aimee McPherson free to speak extemporaneously. She knew how to take advantage of the waves of emotion which swept through her audiences and how to build passages of exhortation directed specifically to her hearers. Exhortation was direct and interspersed with the pronouns: we, you, and us. Passages of exhortation were most intense and concentrated in the conclusions of her sermons. Such arrangement provided an incentive to action for the Foursquare converts. The following sample of exhortation is taken from a sermon, "The Three Little Pigs":

You know someday we're going to be rid of the devil. And the thing to do, my brother, is to say, "Ah, no house of hay for mine." You go ahead if you will with your dancing and your cards and your novels and building or money and pride and fashion. You go ahead if you will with your church membership, only without a born-again experience in your heart. As for me and my house, we will be born again. We will build on the rock, Christ Jesus. We will build for the cross of Calvary, and lift it high and light it that the world may see.12

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10 In a letter from Rev. Raymond Becker, editor The Foursquare Magazine (Dec. 1953).

11 Ibid.

A category separate from exhortation although related closely to it, was that of direct appeal. Rhetorical questions were included in this classification, as well as remarks made by the evangelist, such as "say amen," "everyone say hallelujah," "Isn't that wonderful?" Direct appeal accounted for up to nine percent of the sermon content. Besides the general directness shown by the preceding examples, specific references to persons in the audience were used. Many times Aimee would ask certain people to settle down as a preparation for prayer. Sometimes when a shouting woman would stand up and interrupt the sermon, the evangelist would ask the ushers to escort the shouter from the auditorium. The pastor used members of the audience as specific support in the following manner:

Over yonder is a little sister who was healed of cancer and tumor. Yonder sits a woman who was blind for forty-two years in one eye and had a great growth over the other. Jesus instantly healed her. That woman gave one shout and ran down the aisles praising God. Over there sits a man who has a little baby he brought in here with epilepsy.¹⁸

Such directness as shown in her exhortation and direct appeal was a powerful technique for keeping her listeners in a state of continual alertness, for calling them back to the progress of the discourse, and for stimulating them to active response. Her use of exhortation and direct appeal as stimuli to active response was in keeping with the McPherson ideas on religion. Remember, hers was a gospel that emphasized joy and happiness. Any rhetorical techniques that she could use to produce an overt display of emotion helped to carry out her ideas of worship.

It is evident that Aimee Semple McPherson's background, the nature of her audience, and the doctrine that she preached were related to and influenced the content, style, and delivery of her sermons. She preached a simple doctrine to an unsophisticated audience in a direct and simple manner. Within this framework she was effective. Her death in 1944 ended a twenty-one year career of successful preaching in the Los Angeles area. Through narration and explanation she made her ideas vivid, animated, and clear. She was able to keep her listeners attentive and to stimulate them to activity which culminated in trips to the altar and confessions of faith. She proved herself a persuasive speaker, persuasive enough to start a new religious sect, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel—in 1953 a denomination with 577 churches.

¹⁸ McPherson, "Play Ball," op. cit.