

Dr. Oswald J. Smith: A Unique Church

When I was studying in Toronto, Ont., I once attended a remarkable evening church service. I had never experienced anything like it before in my life. There was an orchestra of about 40, a grand-piano and an organ, and a large choir of male and female voices. The attendance was between 1,500 and 2,000, perhaps the largest Sunday evening service attendance in Canada. The service itself was very lively. There was a special speaker, who dealt with the problem of occultism in the light of the Scriptures. The church described is Peoples Church, then located on Bloor, close to Young Street.

Peoples Church has been called "The Busiest non-catholic church in Canada." ⁽¹⁾ Who made Peoples Church what she is today? The man, the driving force behind this church, is Dr. Oswald J. Smith, her founder, leader, and spiritual father. Peoples Church and Dr. Smith cannot be separated. Dr. Smith is Peoples Church. His character, his missionary zeal, his strong fundamentalism and hyper individualistic concept of Christianity have made an imprint which cannot be erased.

Dr. Oswald Smith was born in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Odessa, Ont., Nov. 8th, 1889. His father was a telegraph operator; thus his childhood days were spent in railway stations. The time spent in Mount Albert, Ont., a small, quiet country town, where he used to live for a while, has never been forgotten by him. After he had risen to fame, he returned there to meditate and to enjoy its pastoral scenery.

In 1906, a great evangelistic campaign was being conducted by the then famed Dr. R. A. Torrey in Massey Hall, Toronto. Though Oswald had never been at an evangelistic campaign before in his life drawn he was to it. During that campaign he was converted. Soon after, he felt drawn to the preaching of the gospel. Yet, he had no idea how to go about entering into the ministry. "At both Embro and Mt. Albert my desire to preach had grown stronger day by day. I felt as though I could not wait for the time to come. So desperate was I that I made a very special plan. I said to myself, 'I will go far from home. I will go so far away that no one will know me. I will go ten miles away, at least. And I will. find a little country church and ask the minister to let me preach, and if I fail I will then know that I am not called, and will return home a wiser boy.' You see, I had no one to advise me, no one to tell me what to do." ⁽²⁾ Shortly after, Oswald Smith read a brief announcement about Toronto Bible College, which resulted in his attending the evening classes for one term. It was not until 1912 that he graduated from that institution. Last year (1968), he was chosen as the Toronto Bible College "Alumnus of the Year." ⁽³⁾ Dr. Billy Graham, and the well-known evangelical journalist Miss Jane Scott, who graduated from Toronto Bible College in 1915, were present for that great occasion.

Dr. Smith's spiritual pilgrimage started in the Presbyterian church where he applied for a mission field under this denomination. However, he was considered too young for this difficult work. He applied to the Upper Canada Society and went as colporteur to Muskoka. In 1908, Oswald Smith, was given the opportunity to preach, despite his lack

of theological and Biblical training. How his thrilled he was! Finally his hour had come! He relates, "In a corner of my room that night I knelt in prayer with my forehead touching the floor, and pled for guidance. I did not have a sermon for I had forgotten every one I had made up in bed. What was I to say? I remembered listening to a sermon in Toronto in Beverley Street Baptist Church by the Rev. Elmore Harris, D.D., one of the editors of the Scofield reference Bible, on Ephesians 1:3, a text that no one should take until he has been in the ministry 25 years at least, and since I had a good memory I was able to recall much of which I had heard. So I decided to use it." (4)

Though Dr. Smith started his ministry soon after his conversion, he did not commence, strictly speaking, his theological studies until 1910. All in all, his academic training consists, of two years in Toronto Bible College, three years in McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, and special studies in Knox College, Toronto. He also had evening classes in Toronto Bible College, and one year in Manitoba College. As student, he also gained a great variety of practical experience in mission work which influenced his later ministry. His academic degrees are as follows: In 1936, Oswald Smith was given the degree of Doctor of Divinity (honorary) by Ashbury College. In 1940, he received the Doctor of Literature degree (honorary) from Bob Jones University. In 1946, he received the degree of Doctor of Laws (honorary) from Houghton College. He is a Life Member of the Royal Geographical Society of London, a member of The Eugene Field Society, the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom, and the American Society of Composers and Authors. (5)

On April 30th, 1915, Dr. Smith was ordained into the ministry of the Gospel in the South Chicago Presbyterian Church, which he served as "Acting Pastor" while he was a student at McCormick Theological Seminary. In May, he left for Toronto, where he became Associate Pastor of Dale Presbyterian Church, a large church, seating capacity of 1,800, located at the corner of Queen Street and Bellwoods Avenue. The edifice was built by Rev. J. D. Morrow, one of the most remarkable ministers in Toronto at that time. Dr. Smith writes about him:

"Mr. Morrow was the first man in Toronto, if not in Canada, to go without a hat, He had vowed that he would not wear a hat until he got enough money to put a roof on his church. And he kept his vow. He wore his hair long and bushy at the back and was a familiar figure on the streets of Toronto. Everybody knew him. The policemen were his friends. Each Monday evening he sat in court, watching for an opportunity to take charge of someone who had erred, whom he might bring home and help. All the street car conductors were acquainted with him. One time he borrowed a "Pay as you enter" box from the Street Car company, and for months he and I took turns standing by it at Yonge and Shuter streets, collecting funds for his church. Sometimes he got animals from the zoo, including bears, and took them into his pulpit to attract children. And they came in multitudes. Moreover, he was a gifted evangelist and a most effective gospel preacher. He knew how to put on a bright, evangelistic service, and thus attract crowds.

The way he told stories, actually acting them out on the platform, sang his own mother songs, and pled for decisions, always brought tears to the eyes. Many decided for Christ under his ministry. He was very active and energetic. And he was most generous. He loved the common people and never felt more at home than when among the poor. To provide for the destitute was his greatest delight. His critics were many, especially in ecclesiastical circles. He died young. Had he lived he might have become one of the world's greatest evangelists. Never will I forget the night he first appeared with his hair cut. 'He had been made Chaplain of the Sportsman's Battalion, the 180th, and was dressed in the uniform of a Captain. For a long time he hesitated behind the curtain. Finally he told me to go first. I stepped out and he followed. In a moment the great congregation burst into applause. When the time came for him to speak he took as his text, 'So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God,' and preached with all his old-time fire, pausing in the midst of his sermon to sing a verse of his favourite song, 'Where is my Wandering Boy Tonight?' Pleading again, and then singing the second verse, as the choir, led by 'Sandy' Grant, came in softly on the chorus, he made his appeal. Handkerchiefs were used freely throughout the congregation. A woman wept aloud. In the gallery a man bowed his head and sobbed as though his heart would break. Oh, what power!" (6)

In 1916, Dr. Smith was placed in full charge of Dale, as Rev. Morrow had to leave for the Front. However, all was not well in the church. There was much strife in the choir, and a great deal of trouble was caused by church officials who were lodge members. (7) The situation became so bad that it became impossible for him to stay and to effectively carry out his ministry. He was judged by the congregation as being too fundamentalistic. The revival meetings he conducted had become a source of offence. Many also objected to the gospel hymns which he had the people sing and the many prayer meetings being conducted. Though Dr. Smith left the Presbyterian church, he never left officially the Presbyterian ministry. He says "On November 5th, 1918, my diary records the fact that I was officially received into the Presbytery of Toronto, and given my full standing as a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, from which I have never resigned, although my work ever since leaving Dale has been, for the most part, outside the denomination." (8)

Dr. Smith for some months supplied the pulpit of Beulah Tabernacle, Charles Street, Toronto. His actions betray that the charge made in Dale of being "too fundamentalist" was not unfounded. His actions, after he left Dale, prove that he had no concept of the covenant, no Reformed understanding of the doctrine of the church. His Christian faith was then and still is the strong individualistic type.

After Dr. Smith left Beulah, he traveled considerably and did independent evangelistic work. On the first Sunday of January, 1921, he was installed as Pastor of the Alliance Tabernacle. This gospel church greatly increased under his ministry. The methods rejected by Dale Presbyterian were now effectively used to increase the membership of the Tabernacle. It was 1921 which also marked the beginning of world-wide ministry. Dr. Smith has extensively traveled in every continent for the Gospel's sake. In 1926, he

resigned to become the Superintendent of the Christian and Missionary Alliance for Eastern Canada. His manner of departure from the Alliance Tabernacle was rather sad. The reason for his resignation is difficult to understand for a Reformed Christian, but it can indeed happen, and it still does happen, in congregational governed churches. Dr. Smith writes,

"...on June 20th, 1926, I preached my farewell sermon, with a heart rent and torn, turned away from my God-given task. The work that had become dearer than life itself, the child of my prayers and tears, born in the travail of my soul, was taken over by others. For a time the great crowds continued to attend, so solid had been the foundation upon which the work has been built. Never had there been the least sign of a split of any kind, for there were no difficulties. I had been maneuvered out when the work was at its very peak and all was well. The last missionary offering was \$34,000.00, an amount never equaled since. Finally, people began to leave, the crowds disappeared and the enthusiasm waned, never to be revived. But perhaps it would be better for the present, at least, if I were to draw a veil over the Gethsemane of those months of torture and despair. I had lost all, or so it seemed, yet God had not forgotten me.'" (9)

Dr. Smith went for a year's ministry to Los Angeles and after that left again for Toronto. In August, 1928, he resigned as a member of the New York Board of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and joined the World-Wide Christian Couriers, and under its auspices was launched what is now "The Peoples Church." The place for the first meeting was Massey Hall, and the date, September 9th, 1928.

The work was first called "The Cosmopolitan Tabernacle." March 30th, 1930, the congregation was moved to the old St. James Square Presbyterian Church, 42 Gerrard Street East, where it was known as the Toronto Gospel Tabernacle. On October 1st, 1933, the name was changed to Peoples Church. On July 1st, 1934, The Peoples Church moved to what used to be then Central Methodist Church. In 1936, this building was bought for \$75,000; \$20,000 of which was donated by Mr. William G. Jaffray, owner and publisher of The Globe, Canada's national newspaper. In 1961, the Peoples Church moved to Sheppard Avenue East.

The old church, now a parking - lot, was sold, for \$650,000, a handsome profit, considering the original sum paid. The new church is a very modern and splendid structure, costing \$1,000,000. The auditorium seats 2,000, at least; it features a grand-piano, an electric organ and a large platform for the choir, soloists and minister. There are many class rooms for Sunday School, meeting halls, offices, and a shipping and receiving room.

One of the unique features in Peoples Church is its missionary outreach. In 1929, Peoples Church Missionary Society was founded. Until 1935, it operated as an independent society which sent out and support missionaries.

In 1935, the church looked to "Faith Missionary Societies" in order to broaden her outreach in the world. Faith missionary societies recruit their workers from many evangelical denominations. They are an important missionary arm of evangelical and fundamentalistic movements in the U.S.A. and Canada. In Canada alone, there are more than 80 missionary societies. Dr. Smith's reason for working with Faith missions was and is: "We have worked with Faith Missions because they are absolutely free of modernism and higher criticism. They are true to the Word of God. Their vision is to evangelize the unreached millions of earth and bring back the King. They do not major on institutional, educational and medical work. Their reliance is on God rather than on the church, and they practice self denial and sacrifice." (10)

In 1930, \$42,891 was contributed to Foreign Missions, and in 1968, \$341,504.84. (11) These monies are being used for the partial support of approximately 350 missionaries around the world.

Dr. Oswald Smith's remarkable career includes also the writing of hymns. One of the better known of his products is "Then Jesus Came." This hymn was written in 1939 and put to the music by Dr. On H. Rodeheaver. This song has become a great favourite and has been sung by Bev. Shea in Billy Graham's Hour of Decision programme.

"When Jesus comes the tempter's power is broken,
When Jesus comes, the tears are wiped away;
He takes the gloom and fills the life with Glory,
For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay." (12)

The Peoples Church is an out "standing fundamentalist" church. In a way she is an example of what old-fashioned fundamentalism used to be, yet she goes beyond that. She combines the weaknesses and strength of fundamentalism of the past, yet she has gone beyond the original intentions of fundamentalism. Original fundamentalism was neither extreme individualistic nor did it major on the pre-millennial, imminent return of Jesus Christ (Christ's return and then the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth.) Peoples Church is individualistic to the extreme and the doctrine of the second coming of Christ is stressed beyond all proportion. "The Peoples Church is an independent work, standing pre-eminently for the conversion of souls, the edification of believers, and world-wide evangelism; emphasizing especially the four great essentials: Salvation, the Deeper Life, Foreign Missions, and our Lord's Return; endeavouring by every means to get the message to the Christless masses, at home and abroad in the shortest time possible. We believe in an unmutated Bible; salvation through the blood of Christ; entire separation from the world; victory over all known sin through the indwelling Spirit; rugged consecration to sacrificial service; practical faith in the sufficiency of Christ for spiritual, temporal and physical needs, purifying hope of the Lord's return; and a burning missionary zeal for the bringing the back of the King through world evangelism." (13)

What does Dr. Smith mean with the church? He believes the church to be a group of born again believers. "By the word 'Church' we do not refer to the institution known as "Roman Catholicism," nor do we mean "the building in which we worship. 'Church', in the Bible is never used in reference to anything save 'believers in Christ'. Sometimes

the word 'bride' or 'body' is used. It never includes merely professing Christians; it is rather the men and women who have been purchased by the blood of Christ and brought into living union with Him, its Head, by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit." (14) God deals only with "individuals" He is choosing individual members who are to make up His church." (15) The church did not exist in the Old Testament. The church, according to Dr. Smith, did not exist until the first coming of Jesus Christ. (16) We live now in the period called the "Church-age." (17)

A sharp distinction is made between the church and the kingdom. Christ is not yet King. He will become King when the millennium is ushered in. "Thus the Kingdom is yet to be established." (18)

At the missionary conference last year, there hung on the right hand side of the church auditorium a huge banner, which read, "First World Evangelization: Then The Reign of Christ." "God's ideal has always been an absolute monarchy, but an absolute monarchy with Christ on the throne. When that time comes the world will be governed in justice and as never before in all its history." (19)

This theology denies consequently the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this present age. It has also little patience for social concern. (20) There are no appeals made for "Benevolence or Home Missions." (21) Now I am the first one to say that Foreign Missions is of vital importance. A church must evangelize and send out missionaries, lest she disobeys her Lord. However, Foreign Missions should not crowd out the total program of the church and her concern for social needs. We cannot leave the ills of society untouched, believing that the second coming of Christ will solve every problem, every heartache. Of course, each Christian ought to long for Christ's second coming. A Christian knows that the second coming of Christ is the blessed hope. However, each Christian must also "occupy" until Christ comes again.

In 1926, Dr. Smith gave eight addresses in the Alliance Tabernacle under the heading "Is the Antichrist at hand?" For these addresses, which are not sermons, as they do not expound Scripture, Dr. Smith had gathered material from the fields of demonology, astrology, politics and religion. From these varied fields, and the Bible, Dr. Smith made some very remarkable predictions about the future. He was quite sure that the Great Tribulation, the revival of the Roman Empire, the reign of the Antichrist and the battle of Armageddon was to take place "before the year 1933." (22) His book proves how careful one must be in expounding prophecy. Dr. Smith is still alive, but the man he believed would be the antichrist is dead. He was quite sure that Mussolini fitted in Revelation 13. "Thousands of eyes are turned just now toward Mussolini, the Prime Minister of Italy. Mussolini may not be the Emperor himself, but if not, he is certainly a remarkable fore-shadowing of the one whom the Bible predicts will reign. It is a well known fact that Mussolini's avowed intention is the revival of the Roman Empire." (23)

In his third address, Dr. Smith refers to Mother Shipton's Prophecies to prove his sincere belief that 1926 was a crucial year in the light of prophecy. Mother Shipton's Prophecies were written nearly 500 years ago. She was born in Norfolk, England and

she died at Clifton, Yorkshire, 1449 A.D. Dr. Smith did not believe that she prophesied, but rather interpreted prophecies of Scripture. ⁽²⁴⁾ The last two verses of her prophetic poem were considered of crucial importance by Dr. Smith.

"In nineteen hundred twenty-six,
Build houses light of straw and sticks,
For then shall mighty wars be planned,
And fire and sword shall sweep the land,
But those who live the century through,
In fear and trembling this will do:
Flee to the mountains and the dens,
To bog and forest and wild fens-
For storms will rage and oceans roar,
When Gabriel stands on sea and shore;
And, as he blows his wondrous horn,
Old worlds shall die and new be born." ⁽²⁵⁾

From the then current history, Dr. Smith tried to prove the validity of Mother Shipton's remarkable claim that 1926 would be crucial. ⁽⁶⁾ All in all, his ability to interpret prophecy does not match his organizational talents. The years 1926 and 1933 are now but dates in history books. How careful one must be in dealing with the prophetic passages of Scripture!

Dr. Oswald Smith made a lasting impact upon the history of the Canadian Protestant church. He and his church, where Dr. Paul Smith, his son, is now pastor also are the driving force behind the work of Faith Missions. Their sacrificial work has benefited independent workers and small missionary societies. Dr. Oswald Smith is indeed a remarkable man who founded a unique church.

Rev. Johan D. Tangelder
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