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Only Believe, All Things Are Possible!—The Revival Legacy of Smith Wigglesworth

BY GARY B. MCGEE

Running down a street in Vevey, Switzerland, young Kenneth Ware heard someone call out to him, "Come here, boy! Put out your tongue!" Since his mother had many English-speaking friends, he thought the man must be an American doctor. But far from a medical doctor, it was Smith Wigglesworth, one of the premier healing evangelists in the Pentecostal movement.

Ware had been a neglected child and now at age 15 stuttered badly. Standing before the evangelist, Wigglesworth took hold of the boy's tongue and abruptly declared, "Lad, this tongue will preach the gospel." From that moment the stuttering ceased, and Ware later became a missionary in France.

Pentecostals stood out from many of their evangelical brothers and sisters because of their bold faith in God's willingness to perform miracles in answer to prayer. In contrast, most Christians at the time had either concluded that miracles had ceased with the Apostolic Age or when they did occur, God had sovereignly chosen to do so. In either case, it was useless to pray and actually expect to see miracles happen. But to Pentecostals, Jesus had promised, "these signs shall follow them that believe" (Mark 16:17,18).

Wigglesworth's bold faith, colorful preaching, controversial methods, and the remarkable testimonies that followed his ministry made him legendary. In fact, after his death and those of Aimee Semple McPherson and Charles S. Price in the 1940s, some of the faithful gloomily deduced that the Spirit's anointing on the Pentecostal movement had been buried with them. Yet, today a younger generation seeking to experience the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit for Christian witness asks: Who was Smith Wigglesworth? Why do people call him the Apostle of Faith?

THE BRADFORD PLUMBER

Those who knew him in his earlier years couldn't have imagined that one day he would see thousands converted, have piles of discarded crutches and braces in his meetings, and have a foreign government take action against him.

Wigglesworth was converted at age 8 in a Wesleyan Methodist revival, and an Anglican bishop confirmed him 2 years later. A Plymouth Brethren friend gave him instruction in the Bible. With

their radical view of faith, the Brethren encouraged those involved in the Lord's work to simply pray and trust God for material needs. This meant that sharing one's needs publicly could only indicate unbelief.

In his early years, the internationally acclaimed George Müller, another product of the Brethren, modeled the idealized "faith life" at his orphanage in Bristol. Without advertising the financial needs for the care of several thousand children, God miraculously provided. The fame of Müller may have inspired Wigglesworth. Although he said he read only the Bible, it is likely that the influence of the Brethren laid the seeds for his later confidence in the "prayer of faith" (James 5:15).

In his late teens in Bradford, England, while preparing to become a master plumber, Wigglesworth became attracted to the Salvation Army because they seemed to have more spiritual power than any other group. And through this association, he met Polly Featherstone. Subsequent to their marriage in 1882, they shared in ministry by opening Bowland Street Mission in Bradford.

Visiting nearby Leeds, he attended a "divine healing service" and became convinced from Scripture that God still heals the sick. Polly accompanied him to one of the services and received a healing herself. Wigglesworth, however, continued to suffer from hemorrhoids and took salts every day to clear his lower digestive tract. When Polly challenged him with his own unbelief, he anointed himself with oil according to the instruction in James 5:14. Instantly, healing took place and the malady never returned.

In spite of Wigglesworth's physical strength, he lacked self-confidence. He couldn't speak from the pulpit for more than 2 or 3 minutes before breaking down in tears and asking someone else to finish for him. Polly was the preacher in the family. For Smith, these were years of intense personal struggle, which unfortunately resulted in a time of spiritual coldness. Nevertheless, his family grew (he and Polly had five children), and his prospering business was flooded with calls.

WHEN THE FIRE FELL

Two stirring spiritual experiences changed him and his ministry forever: (1) In 1893 while attending one of the famous "higher life" conferences at the resort town of Keswick, the equivalent of an American camp meeting, he testified to being sanctified or baptized in the Spirit, as taught by the Keswick preachers. (2) A greater turning point in his life occurred in 1907. He heard that people were receiving the Holy Spirit at Sunderland and decided to go and see for himself. Convinced that he had already gotten the Pentecostal Baptism, he grew discouraged while attending the services at All Saints' (Anglican) Church. Though "slain in the

Spirit" several times, his spiritual hunger became even more intense.

Finally, after 4 days of seeking to speak in tongues, he decided to head home but first stopped by the vicarage to say good-bye. Mary Boddy, the vicar's wife, said, "Brother Wigglesworth, it is not the tongues you need but the Baptism. If you will allow God to baptize you, the other will be all right." Although protesting that he had previously been baptized, he asked her to lay hands on him and pray that he would receive. After she did so and unexpectedly left the room, "the fire fell," he recalled. "The joy was so great that when I came to utter it my tongue failed, and I began to worship God in other tongues as the Spirit gave me utterance."

After arriving home, he found that Polly doubted his new experience. She claimed she was as much Spirit baptized as him without speaking in tongues. "I have been preaching for 20 years," she asserted, "and you have sat beside me on the platform. But on Sunday you will preach yourself, and I'll see what there is in it."

The next Sunday he entered the pulpit and, prompted by the Spirit, preached from Isaiah 61:1-3: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings...." The bold and fluent preaching that came forth startled his wife as she sat in the back of the mission. Speaking in a voice loud enough that everyone around her heard, Polly sputtered, "That's not my Smith, Lord; that's not my Smith!"

Polly was filled with the Spirit soon after, and the Bowland Street Mission changed dramatically. They continued in ministry until Polly's death 6 years later in 1913. Unknown to Wigglesworth, that humble beginning had ignited a preaching ministry that would eventually take him around the world.

APOSTLE OF FAITH

Wigglesworth's beliefs mirrored those of other Pentecostals, and robust faith characterized his life. Those who attended his meetings remembered the awesome presence of the Spirit, his fearless preaching, the testimonies of miraculous healings, and his leading them in the chorus "Only Believe." Over and over in his services and in those of other evangelists, the words of this song brought hope to the suffering by telling them that "All things are possible, only believe."

Indeed, he preached that "faith is the audacity that rejoices in the fact that God cannot break His own Word. Faith is not agitation; it is quiet confidence that God means what He says, and we act on His Word." Yet, there was nothing quiet or subtle about Wigglesworth. He had a voice to match the vigor of his faith.

At times he became so filled with joy that his vocal praise could rattle the serenity of the gravest of souls. On one occasion he went to a concert hall for a presentation of Handel's *Messiah*. When the choir finished singing the last note of the "The Hallelujah Chorus," he roared "Hallelujah!" Shocked concertgoers shuddered at this outlandish behavior. A reporter wrote in the morning paper the next day, "I never heard such a voice in my life!"

One must credit him with consistency in trusting God for his physical health, even as Pentecostals gradually accepted the complementary roles of prayer and medical science in healing. He and Polly agreed never to seek the help of doctors or take medicine but to trust Christ as their healer. Suffering had no place in God's plan for the believer. Wigglesworth saw praying for the sick as a contest between God and the devil: "I have no word for rheumatism only 'demon possessed.' Rheumatism, cancers, tumors, lumbago, neuralgia, all these things I give only one name, the power of the devil working in humanity. When I see consumption, I see demon working power there. All these things can be removed."

His notion of praying for the sick as an act of spiritual warfare helps account for his rough handling of people in his earlier ministry. He thought of striking a person where they hurt as actually hitting the devil. Although some reported healing as a result, others thought it best to avoid identifying the location of their pain. In one service, however, he met his match. At Glad Tidings Tabernacle in New York City, after he had struck an Irish immigrant woman who had gone forward for prayer, she immediately drew back her fist and shouted, "Begorra, if it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get!" Fortunately, calm prevailed and the service proceeded without further incident.

Wigglesworth's services never bored his audiences. At a meeting in Washington, D.C., a young girl on crutches entered the auditorium with the help of two other people. With no muscular ability, her legs dangled with her feet hanging vertically. When he invited those who wanted prayer to walk to the front, she struggled to go forward. Calling out to her, he said, "Stay right where you are. You are going to be a different girl when you leave this place." Inquiring about her condition, he learned she had never walked before. Laying his hands on her head in prayer, the former plumber from Bradford, England, commanded, "In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!" Suddenly, she dropped her crutches and began walking.

In Sweden, Wigglesworth triggered such a furor among the medical doctors and clergy of the Lutheran state church that they denounced his practice of praying for the sick. As a result, the

government forbade him to lay hands on anyone for prayer. Undaunted, when a crowd of 20,000 assembled at an outdoor service, he stayed within the law by telling the sick to stand and lay their hands on their afflicted parts while he prayed for them. Many claimed deliverance as they did in his campaigns elsewhere.

THE DIVINE MYSTERY

The vision of expectant faith, however, inevitably becomes obscured by the cloud of mystery that sometimes shrouds the divine will: Why isn't everyone healed who seeks for it? Does God allow believers to suffer for reasons they may never understand this side of heaven? Those who focused much of their energies on praying for the sick often dismissed the importance of these questions, perhaps because they feared that such discussion might feed doubts and undercut peoples' faith for healing.

Though Wigglesworth believed mightily in God's promise to heal, he himself mourned the early deaths of his wife and a son. He prayed frequently for his daughter Alice Salter to be healed of deafness but to no avail. To add to his frustration, he endured excruciating pain for 3 years from a "thorn in the flesh"—kidney stones. Like others, he could only deduce that he hadn't mustered sufficient faith.

Nevertheless, two of his counterparts attempted to resolve the problem but with mixed results. F.F. Bosworth devoted a chapter in his popular *Christ the Healer* (1924) to explaining 22 reasons why people fail to receive healing. Unwittingly, Bosworth created a millstone of guilt that God never intended His children to bear. On the other hand, Charles S. Price suggested in *The Real Faith* (1940) that "healing is not dependent upon the development of perfect faith by any process of self at all; but rather on contact with Jesus...the giver of every good and perfect gift." Healing faith comes as a gift from God.

A LEGACY OF FAITH AND WITNESS

While many evangelicals stood on the sidewalk pondering the details of the map at the turn of the century, Pentecostals grabbed the apostolic banner and marched down the parade route of the Great Commission testifying to God's miraculous power as they preached the gospel. Spirit baptism had transformed them with empowerment for ministry and enlarged their understanding of what His power could do.

Pioneers like Wigglesworth passed on a legacy of expectant—some would say reckless—faith. Nonetheless, Pentecostals still had to return to the map for specifics. The Bible as the rule of faith and practice remains the indispensable guide for the contours of the tough questions. It would be unwise, however, to stop praying

and asking for demonstrations of supernatural might. Faith can stand on the divine paradox but falters when everything must depend on either human initiative or a misunderstanding of God's sovereignty. In recent years, Pentecostals have profited from seeing the connection between signs and wonders and the advancing kingdom of God in understanding the function of miracles in the life and mission of the Church (Matthew 10:7,8; 1 Corinthians 4:20).

Contemporary Pentecostals hunger for a new outpouring of the Spirit to reach the nations for Christ. If alive today, Smith Wigglesworth with his booming voice would probably call the saints to repentance and cry out, "Oh God, let the fire fall!"

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RECOMMENDED READING

By Smith Wigglesworth:

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