

James Mckeown (1900-1989)

by Keith Malcomson

James McKeown's life exemplified dedication to evangelism and church growth, leaving a profound impact on the Pentecostal movement in Africa.

Scripture: Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 4:7

Topics: "Evangelism", "Discipleship"

Description

Keith Malcomson shares the inspiring life story of James McKeown, a dedicated missionary who left a lasting impact in Africa through his unwavering faith, commitment to prayer, and emphasis on evangelism and discipleship. James' journey from Scotland to Africa, his encounters with Pentecostal leaders like George Jeffreys and Smith Wigglesworth, and his pioneering work in establishing churches and training leaders in Ghana demonstrate his deep love for God and passion for spreading the Gospel amidst challenges and opposition.

Transcript

James McKeown's parents were from Northern Ireland, when young they ran off to Scotland in order to get married. They settled in the village of Glenboig, near Glasgow. It was here that James was born, the second of nine children. His parents were strict Presbyterians. His father had no book but the Bible. When James was just eight a man from their Church travelled to Sunderland where the Pentecostal movement began in Britain in the Anglican church of A.A. Boddy. This man returned speaking in tongues.

James's parents attended meetings at which both were filled with the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues. He was eleven when his family moved back to Portglenone in N.Ireland. He soon left School to help his dad on the new farm. It was in 1916 That George Jeffreys held a five week tent campaign in Ballymena near their farm. The tent held less than 300 people but during that time 120 were won to Christ. A great many consecrated themselves afresh unto God and 23 were baptized in the Holy Ghost.

Every night the tent was filled to capacity, on Sunday nights the side of the tent was let down to allow all those gathered outside the tent to participate. One of the favourite hymns of this mission was 'Ireland for Christ.' The McKeown home became something of a centre for Pentecostal meetings especially on Sunday nights when they would continue to the early hours of the morning. Both George Jeffreys and Smith Wigglesworth ministered at these meetings, these two men left a marked influence on his home and his young life.

It would later be said that James's preaching style was very like Jeffreys. At a house meeting in a friend's home as the preacher told of the love and suffering of Christ James lost all sight of the preacher and was overcome by a revelation of Jesus Christ, he was gripped by the Gospel and wept at this new revelation. From then on he loved the Lord and had a great love and appetite for His Word. He next sought for the baptism in the Holy Ghost, others were filled but nothing happened to him.

He got to a very desperate state where he had to have this filling. That night kneeling at the bench he was emptied of all and filled with the Spirit of God, speaking in tongues. His first attempt at open-air preaching began and ended with a mere apology which he laughed over afterwards. Sophia his future wife was drawn to him by his praying. She had spent much time around the Faith Mission but was soon drawn to these new Pentecostals and sought the baptism in the Holy Ghost.

They were both baptised in water by George Jeffreys. In 1927 they were married and moved to Scotland. It was here that they came in touch with the Apostolic Church under the leadership of Andrew Turnbull. After a time, he was involved with the open-air work, made an elder in the church and was being sent to preach at assemblies and conventions around Scotland. A main emphasis of this church group was the restoration of the ministry of the Apostle and Prophet as well as the use of directive-prophecy.

James could discern the misuse and abuse of this ministry but also could see the genuine operation of the gifts. He was always careful to be led of God and not the manipulations of man. A call came for him to go to Africa as a missionary and though from a boy he had read many such testimonies he refused feeling his inability for the task as far as his education. Later amidst pleadings from his wife he reconsidered. In 1937 he left for Africa taking an eleven day journey by steamer with the vision of planting the Apostolic Church in the Gold Coast.

This area of Africa was dominated by idol worship, political tension and spiritual darkness. The denominational missions to the country were mere mini-replicas of the church in the homeland without great influence amongst the people. But God had prepared a group in the Gold Coast, a group of Presbyterians under the leadership of Peter Anim had experienced being healed and filled with the Holy Ghost and were now asking for a Pastor from Britain. It was to these believers that James was sent. He was the only white man amongst 5000 Africans in a town called Asamankese. With his own hands he helped these believers build a mission house. That a white man would do such won over their hearts. He ate their food, worshipped with them and would walk 40 miles through the bush to outlying groups where he preached in the open-air. He soon found the leaders in the mother group held very extreme views on healing and also realised some were telling lies especially about money matters. After three months he went down seriously ill and was so bad that he thought he would die. The District Commissioner heard how ill he was and so got him to a hospital. After eleven days James returned well again but these believers thought he was backslidden for taking medication. At this point his wife arrived from Scotland. At this point in June 38 they stepped out by themselves to a place called Winneba to start from scratch again (A final break came with this group in June 1939).

Throughout their years in Africa they rarely ever got ill. Every where they went God confirmed his word with mighty signs and wonders following the preaching of the Gospel. James always played this down and taught the believers to rather rejoice that their names were written in the lambs book of life. The emphasis was always changed lives. He would send out young evangelists who would stand against the witch doctors, they saw the lame walk, the blind see and even the dead raised. Through this means large numbers of people began to believe in Christ Jesus as Saviour and Lord. By June 39 about 200 believers

were connected to the McKeowns and so they held their first convention, with James ordaining the first elders. After convention they took their first short furlough back to the UK. James built this work on prayer, he rose early to pray and soon the Africans caught this burden of prayer.

Another move came to Cape Coast which became a base where Sophia could stay while James made treks out into the bush by bicycle, but most of the time on foot. He came across large groups that were a confused mix of error and truth but who had been waiting since 1914 for a white man to come teach them. And this is what he did. Polygamy and fornication was everywhere amongst the people, but he would not tolerate such amongst the new converts. During the war years, 39-45, they received no provisions from home, they were shut up in this land and left to fend for themselves. Because of their humility, love and example they really won the heart of the people. James was not scared to entrust Africans with leadership and money, this led to much growth. This church must be indigenous, he taught them to support themselves without outside help and that their first priority was to preach the Gospel to the lost. While other missionaries were involved in building schools and clinics, James built a Church by Evangelising and training others to do so. As the work grew he would hold central conventions to preach and teach the people.

In 1948 they moved their base to Accra, the capital to make it easier to travel and minister in the many churches springing up across the land. It became a priority for him to train up leaders. These leaders went and pioneered in hard places and in turn raised up strong churches. By 49 there were 16 men in full time ministry. It was in 1953 that Dr Thomas Wyatt with a team from Canada came to the Gold Coast at the invitation of the Church Council. As Dr Wyatt preached thousands gathered, the lame walked, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the dumb sang and some from leper colonies were made whole. The British Apostolic's tightened the power of their central government in 53 to stop outside ministry coming in. Finally James was asked to leave, which with great sadness he did and would no longer be welcome to minister in Apostolic pulpits anywhere. The Church in the Gold Coast broke off from the British Apostolic's and asked James to return as their superintendent. They lost ownership of most of their buildings but James never got side tracked from the heavenly vision, to evangelise. He never lost focus; never compromised, he would not be diverted. Even when splits, betrayals or slander came he just held fast to scripture. Great pressure came to remove him from the church and the country but finally he was vindicated by the president in 1962 who gave him full freedom. The Church then became known as The Church Of Pentecost.

Over the next years there was tremendous growth amongst these churches. He made several ministry trips to America and Canada. In 1969 at their general convention 35,000 people gathered, 100 leaders sat on the platform as James ministered the Word for 75 minutes. It was after this that they affiliated with the Elim Pentecostal Movement, which soon planted a Bible School as a Bible Centre for the Church of Pentecost. By 1974 the life in Ghana was too much for his wife Sofia so they moved back to N.Ireland and bought a two-bedroomed cottage in Ballymena. Every year he would return to Ghana for three to four months at convention time until 1982. He slowly withdrew from his responsibilities leaving the full responsibilities on the shoulders of the Africans. When in 83 Sophia died, the Africans begged him to return. His last visit to Ghana was in 84 when he preached on the text "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." At the 1985 convention 125,000 gathered. The Church of Pentecost was the fastest growing church in West Africa, with over 3000 churches having a membership of 270,000. It had spread into over forty countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Australia, and North America. He died in 1989 entering into his eternal rest and reward. The great mark of his life to the end was his humility.

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