

50 Years of the People's Church

by Oswald J. Smith

Oswald J. Smith reflects on the 50-year history of the People's Church, emphasizing the importance of evangelism and missions.

Duration: 43:40

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:3, Matthew 28:19

Topics: "Anniversary"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the history of the People's Church and their emphasis on evangelism and missions. He shares his personal experience of seeing men and women accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior during the evening services. The speaker also mentions the success of their radio broadcasts, which lasted for two and a half hours every Sunday night for seven years. He expresses gratitude for the work that God has done in Toronto and highlights the souls that have been saved and the missionary work that has been carried out.

Transcript

If I were to choose a text tonight in connection with the message of the evening, I would turn to Jeremiah the thirty-third chapter and the third verse. Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things that thou knowest not. That has been characteristic of the work of the people's church all down through the fifty years of its history.

Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things that thou knowest not. When I left McCormick Theological Seminary in 1915, I was called to Dale Presbyterian Church here in the city of Toronto where Reverend J.D. Morrill was the pastor. And I became an associate pastor in Dale Church in 1915 when I was twenty-five years of age, a church seating eighteen hundred people and a church that God greatly and richly blessed.

Then when I left Dale, I prayed very, very much about my future work, and I felt led to build the Alliance Tabernacle on Christie Street. And that was done in 1921. An auditorium that accommodated eighteen hundred people and that was filled to capacity again and again and again.

Then there came the year 1928, and as I prayed about my life's work, I felt strangely led of God to establish, by his grace, a work here in the city of Toronto that was to last for at least fifty years, the people's church. That, as I've stated, was in 1928 when I was thirty-eight years of age. And from that day

to this, God has been with us and God has blessed in an unusual way.

As I stand before you here tonight, my mind goes back fifty years from last night. For as Dr. Paul has already stated, it was on a Sunday, it was on the ninth of September, it was in the year 1928, and there I held the very first service that was ever held of the people's church. I had invited Paul Rader, who was pastor of the Moody Church, Chicago, and president of the Christian Missionary Alliance.

I'd invited him to come and preach for me that night to get the work started. And he came. I was on the platform of Massey Hall, and I took charge of the service, and Paul Rader brought the message of the evening.

Then I started holding services in Massey Hall every Sunday night. And for four and one-half months, I preached in Massey Hall every night, as I've already stated, for four and a half months. The rent for Massey Hall at that time was \$100 per night.

There were no difficulties, there were no problems of any kind whatever. The Lord sent the money in. He sent the people to the services.

They gave freely, even though times were hard. And we paid \$100 a night rent for Massey Hall for four and one-half months, and I preached each night during that period. I am not absolutely sure, but I have an idea that today, for a weeknight gathering of any kind, the rent in Massey Hall is perhaps \$4,000 for the night.

I'm not sure about that, but I know there has been a tremendous increase. And if I were to want Massey Hall now, if I had to pay anything like that, I would have to turn elsewhere. Massey Hall became very, very dear to me, because many a time I transferred my services from wherever I was to Massey Hall, and there held my meetings on Sunday nights.

In 1929, Paul Reuter asked me to go to Europe. I visited Latvia, where God enabled me to establish a Bible school that continued its work for 10 years until the war broke out, and to France and to Belgium and to Spain, where I cooperated in another Bible school, which also continued for 10 years until it was closed because of the war. When I came back from Europe, where I had been sent by Paul Reuter under the Worldwide Christian Couriers, when I came back, I held the first missionary convention, the first effort that was put forth, so far as that work was concerned, for foreign missions.

The offering that night in Massey Hall was \$10,000 for missions. I thought it was a large amount. In those days, \$10,000 seemed a very, very large amount.

But that was the first missionary offering in connection with the work of the People's Church, an offering of \$10,000 for foreign missions. Then I went through the United States, traveling all over the country, raising money for the support of missions in Latvia and France and Belgium and Spain, and God enabled me to raise \$60,000 for those works. And so we carried on our work in the foreign fields in Europe for some considerable time, and God supplied the means as only he could.

Presently, I left Massey Hall, where I have been preaching every night. I left Massey Hall, and I went to St. James Square Presbyterian Church, and we opened the work there with a missionary convention. I invited my great friend Paul Ritter to be the speaker at that convention on the last Sunday night, and he was there.

And the offering that night was \$25,000, an increase of \$15,000 from the offering taken up in Massey Hall, \$25,000 for missions. The church seated about 1,200 people. Then there came a great tour that I took in 1932, and when I returned from that tour, for the first time, I saw the auditorium of St. James Square Presbyterian Church filled to capacity.

It's something that I'll never forget, for I was surprised beyond measure. But do you know that from that night on through the following years, for 30 years, I faced an audience night after night on Sunday nights. I faced a full house with the exception of a very brief period in the hot summer months and God wonderfully blessed and marvelously saved souls.

And that work went on, as I've already stated, for a period of 30 years. During the time that I was holding these services, Don Billings was our pianist, and I'll never forget how he helped me in the work that I was doing then as he played the piano night after night in Massey Hall and then in St. James Square Presbyterian Church. I thank God that he's still with us in the congregation and still attends the church along with his wife.

Then I felt that the time had come to move to another church. St. James Square Presbyterian Church was getting too small. It was not able to take care of the crowds that were attending.

I heard that Central Methodist Church on Bloor Street, 100 Bloor East, was vacant. And immediately I felt led to rent Central Methodist Church on Bloor Street and make it my church. And I did so.

And for some six years we carried on the work and paid rent. And every Sunday night that church was packed to capacity year after year. And I had the privilege of standing before a full house in Central Methodist Church, which I called, of course, the People's Church, for that was the name I gave it at that time.

And souls were saved, the crowds came, God blessed, and we had a wonderful time during those years we were in the church on Bloor Street. Bloor Street ran east and west, as you know, therefore the people were able to come in streetcars. There were not very many automobiles in the church in those days.

Most people came to church by streetcar and they would come from the east and they would come from the west along Bloor Street and the streetcar would stop right in front of the church and unload. And then there was Yonge Street running north and south and there was Church Street running north and south. And we were so close to the streetcars that brought the people to the services that we had a full house year after year, Sunday after Sunday, and I had the privilege of preaching to that congregation and laboring there for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think the buying of the church was a most interesting experience, for at the end of six years we felt led to buy the church and make it our own church. Suddenly one day William Jaffrey, the owner of the Globe, called me on the telephone and asked me if I would come with my wife to his home in Oakville and have dinner with him and with his wife. His brother, Robert Jaffrey, was working very closely with me in missionary work on the foreign field.

And of course as soon as I got that wonderful invitation my wife and I went, as requested, to the home of William Jaffrey and had dinner with them. And that was a night that I'll never, never forget. That godly couple sat there at the dinner table and asked me all about my plans for the future.

What was I going to do? Was I going to continue paying rent or was I going to buy a church? What had God led us as a board and as a congregation to do in connection with his work? I told Mr. Jaffrey that I most definitely wanted to buy the church if at all possible. I knew it was for sale. It was owned by the United Church of Canada and was up for sale.

And I felt that if we could buy the church we could accomplish the work that God wanted us to accomplish down through the future years. Mr. Jaffrey asked me a great many questions. He wanted to know how much we would have to pay for it.

I told him sixty-five thousand dollars. He asked me why I did not go ahead and buy it. We had a full house, Sunday night after Sunday night, packed to capacity, except as I've stated for a few Sundays in the hot summer months.

God was blessing and saving souls. And I said to him, Mr. Jaffrey, I have announced to my people again and again that I would not buy a church until I had one gift of ten thousand dollars. And every time I made that announcement the people laughed.

The idea, they said, of getting a gift of ten thousand dollars from one person, it seemed out of the question. However, I went on and told Mr. Jaffrey my plans and what I felt I wanted to do. Next morning, Mr. Jaffrey telephoned my wife.

I was busy in my office and he said, I want you to tell your husband that after much earnest prayer, I have felt led to give him a gift of twenty thousand dollars with which to buy the church. Well, of course, I was flabbergasted. I had asked for ten thousand dollars.

If I had asked for five thousand dollars, that might have been the amount that I would have received. My wife was so astonished when I asked for one third of the total amount, something like twenty thousand dollars. She was so astonished that she wondered if anything could happen.

And when Mr. Jaffrey called her on the phone the next morning and told her that he had decided to give twenty thousand dollars, she was speechless. She hardly knew what to say. She immediately called me at the office and gave me the good news.

And I was so elated that I hurried back home to talk it over with her. And sure enough, Mr. Jaffrey sent me a check for twenty thousand dollars, the largest amount I had ever received. He had just sold the globe.

And he was giving away the money that he got from the sale of the globe to various religious enterprises of one kind and another. And the amount he felt led to give to me so that we might buy the people's church on Bloor Street was, as I've stated, twenty thousand dollars. You can imagine that I was walking on air.

I hardly knew what to say. I didn't know how to thank God for it. I was stirred beyond expression.

Immediately, we bought the church and in a very short time, the balance of the money needed came in, little by little, until at last it had all come in and the church was paid for and became the people's church on Bloor Street. And soon it was famous throughout the entire world, especially because of its tremendous missionary work. The crowds were so great year after year that I stopped all advertising in the newspaper.

And for seven years, I never put an ad of any kind on the church page. And I used to speak over the air and we were on the air for two and a half hours every Sunday night for years and years. We had a back

home hour broadcast after the regular service and the work went on without having to do any advertising for a period of seven years, as I've stated.

And then we started again to advertise a little bit, but very little, because God was greatly and wonderfully blessing the work. I'll never forget those days. They were days that will stay with me as long as I live.

But you know, when the people saw the crowds coming and they saw the people being turned away, even though I would get up in the pulpit and announce over the air that the church was full and beg the people to stay home and not to come, because there wasn't any room, there were no seats vacant. But you know, the more I made that announcement, the more they came. And they came and they stood and they sat on the steps and they sat in the aisles and they stood at the back and that went on for 30 years from the time it started.

I'll never, never forget it. We had a great pipe organ in that church. It was there when we started renting the church.

It filled the whole of the back gallery. Every bit of the back gallery was filled with the pipes of the pipe organ. And the people used to look at that organ and they used to say if we could just somehow get rid of the organ, if we could sell it, if we could give it away, if we could do something with it, then we could accommodate that many more people.

And the day came when a Roman Catholic priest took a fancy to the organ and decided to buy it. And he did so. And that organ was placed in a Roman Catholic church here in the city of Toronto and we built a second gallery which we called an elevation.

We built it up above the first gallery at the back of the church where the organ pipes used to stand. From the very first night that that elevation was opened, it was filled to capacity and filled ever after. And many a one came from the elevation to go to the inquiry room to accept Jesus Christ as a personal Savior.

That's another thing that I'll never, never forget. We emphasized evangelism. Every Sunday night was an evangelistic message.

And from 300 to 500 decisions for Jesus Christ were registered every year as a result of our emphasis on Sunday nights on evangelism with a full house, tremendous interest, a message on evangelism, evangelistic hymns. God worked in a wonderful way as only he could and souls were saved. The auditorium was filled continually to capacity and God continued to bless and work as only he could.

Many a time, many a time when I would bring special speakers to the people's church, I would close the church and rent Massey Hall and hold my Sunday evening service in Massey Hall. I remember when Gypsy Smith came to hold his two campaigns in the people's church. The crowds were so great from the very first that we took over Massey Hall once again and night after night, Sunday after Sunday, we held a service in Massey Hall with Gypsy Smith bringing the message of the evening.

And when other speakers would come, we would do the same thing. I remember when Jackie Burrus came and held his campaign. I remember how the church was filled to capacity as he preached the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's something I'll never forget. And we left the church and we went first of all to Massey Hall and we held our Sunday evening services, Sunday after Sunday, for several weeks in Massey Hall. And then the

crowds were so great that we decided to go to Maple Leaf Gardens.

And we went to Maple Leaf Gardens and held our Sunday evening service there. And as far as we could count the people, there were 11,000 people present each Sunday night by a careful count, 11,000 people listening to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that I held my regular services in the People's Church on Bloor Street. And then we went to Massey Hall or Maple Leaf Gardens for the Sunday night when we had a special speaker and an unusual service.

That's something that I'll never, never forget. Now I did a great deal of traveling while I was pastor in those days. And one time I stayed away for six and a half months when I went to Australia and the Solomon Islands and New Zealand.

Generally, I stayed away three months or four months. I made 21 world tours during those days, 21 world tours. And every time I came back to Toronto, I came back to a full house to the work on Bloor Street.

And the crowds continued coming, God continued to save souls, and the work made tremendous progress. Altogether, I visited 70 countries holding campaigns, preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, facing immense audiences in these different countries, being used of God wherever I traveled, blessed of him as the services continued. And the work in Toronto never suffered.

It went on growing, growing, growing all the time, and souls continued to be saved. And God worked in a wonderful way as we carried on the services for the Lord Jesus Christ. We emphasized two things, and only two things.

We emphasized missions, and we emphasized evangelism. Now, of course, there were messages on the deeper life at the morning service, but our emphasis was on evangelism at the evening service. That was when we saw men and women walking down the aisles, going to the inquiry room, and there accepting Jesus Christ as a personal savior.

It's something that lives in my memory that I'll never forget. And I discovered that it took evangelism to fill the church in those days, and God worked in a wonderful way. Then we emphasized missions, evangelism at home, missions abroad, and we labored in missionary work with the various faith missions of the day and sought to win souls to Jesus Christ on the foreign fields of the world.

We started with only five missionaries. Before I resigned from the People's Church, we were supporting, partially supporting, 300 missionaries. Then Dr. Paul took over the work, as you know.

I think it was in 1969. At least it was when I was 69 years of age. It must have been in 1959 when I was 60 years of age, when I was 70 years of age.

And Dr. Paul continued to emphasize the missionary work of the church, and our missionaries increased from 300 to the number we have today, including nationals, 560 missionaries on the foreign fields of the world. I believe the reason God has blessed the work of the People's Church down through the years that have passed and gone has been because we emphasized evangelism for the homework, and we emphasized missions for the foreign work. And placing the emphasis where we believed it belonged, God blessed the work of the church itself in a wonderful and glorious way, and worked for his glory and for his honor.

Massey Hall has always been very, very dear to me. Again and again, I have gone there to hold my Sunday evening service. At least I went there in those early years when we only had to pay \$100 a night rent.

Time after time, I used Massey Hall as my church, and God worked and worked as only he could. But most important of all, I was saved in Massey Hall when I was 16 years of age in the year 1906. I traveled all the way from Embro, where my father was station agent on the CPR.

I traveled all the way from there, a distance of 94 miles, to attend the services of Dr. R. A. Torrey and Charles M. Alexander, and in 1906, after arriving in Toronto and going to stay with my uncle and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Finley, who was the president of the Massey Harris Company, and continued as president for a number of years until God took him home. I stayed with them, and I went to every service held by Dr. R. A. Torrey and Charles M. Alexander in Massey Hall. When I came to the second to last service, I was so under conviction that I got up out of my seat, I went down to the basement of Massey Hall, and there I bowed my head and gave myself to the Lord Jesus Christ, inviting him to come into my heart and to save me.

And from the time I was 16, I knew Christ as my Savior. When I was 18 years of age, I started preaching, and I have been preaching now for exactly 70 years. This year marks the 70th year of my ministry, and God has blessed during the 70 years in the most wonderful and glorious way, and he is still working.

I'm so glad that I am seeing now new developments in the church, new things being done, new work being attempted, and that God is blessing the ministry of Dr. Paul in these days in the most marvelous way, just as I was blessed in my day when I held my meetings years ago now, and I thank God for what he has done. At this present time, I'm 88 years of age. On November the 8th of this year, which is not very far off, I'll be 89 years of age.

For all these 88 years, every year, I have been preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have been evangelizing, and I have seen men and women coming to the Savior all down through the years, and I want to thank him and praise him for what he has done and for the work that he is doing today. It has been a wonderful work.

It's been a glorious ministry. It's been a time of unusual blessing, and I'll never cease to praise God for what he has done here in Toronto, in Massey Hall, in St. James Square Presbyterian Church, in the People's Church on Bloor Street, formerly Central Methodist Church, and now for what he is doing here in this auditorium, the wonderful things that are happening, the souls that are being saved, the missionary work that is being carried on, the blessing that is being showered upon the congregations as the people attend, and I want to thank him that it has not been in vain. It was not a vain thing that I did when I launched the first service of the People's Church in 1928 when I was 38 years of age.

It has lasted now for all these 50 years, the first service 50 years ago last night, and now we're starting on the 51st year of our work, and God is continuing to bless, continuing to save souls, continuing to work in the foreign field, and I believe he's going to work on for years yet to come. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this church could see another 50 years? I'll never see that day. I'll go to be with my Lord long before that day.

No man can live to be 89 years of age and expect to live very much longer, but if this work could go on and souls could still be saved for the next 50 years, another great celebration could be held 50 years from now. Wouldn't it be wonderful? I'm sure there are some here tonight who will be living at that time, and you

will be able to look back to this day when we're celebrating the first 50 years of the work of the people's church. We have called upon God.

God has heard. God has answered, and now under Dr. Paul's ministry and all those who are associated with him as associate ministers and all who are helping by prayer and in every other way, I'm sure that the future is going to be glorious, and there's going to be wonderful blessing in the days that lie ahead. So I call upon God.

He has never failed me. He never will fail, and I do not believe that he will ever fail the work of the people's church.

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