

## **Book Review**

*Miracles, Missions, & American Pentecostalism*

American Society of Missiology Series, No. 45

**Gary B. McGee**

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 326 pages

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The late Gary B. McGee, a longtime Assemblies of God educator, served as Distinguished Professor of Church History and Pentecostal Studies at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. McGee, author of seven books and contributor to fifteen others, completed his final book, *Miracles, Missions, & American Pentecostalism*, just weeks before his death. His propensity for discovering pertinent data from stuffy archives and little-known libraries, combined with his skill as a writer, produced a very readable volume that represents his legacy to the fields of church history and missiology.

While the historiography of Pentecostal expansion is emerging from its infancy, and several significant studies have been published, *Miracles, Missions, & American Pentecostalism* differs from some of the most recent works in the field by more closely examining the historical, theological, and missiological context of the American Pentecostal movement and how the expectancy of miracles fits into the early twentieth-century mission landscape.

McGee, who felt that many required texts in Bible colleges, universities, and seminaries often overlook or evade reports about supernatural phenomena and extraordinary experiences, generously sprinkles his

manuscript with terminology such as miracles, signs and wonders, healings, visions, revivals, spiritual gifts, power encounters, and exorcisms.

The author tackles what he considers a problem needing a more comprehensive explanation—the attempt to explain the apostolic nature of mission without the possibility of miraculous signs and wonders. He identifies and probes into five attitudes among Protestant missionaries and their home base supporters regarding the issue of miracles—ranging from full-blown cessationism (the liberal theological view) to wholehearted acceptance and anticipation of the full restoration of miracles and spiritual gifts (the radical evangelical view).

McGee dedicates the book to Jennie Glassey (1877-1952), a little known, but courageous young woman and early missionary to Palestine. Her life and testimony fueled at least part of the interest in writing this book about other missionaries who dared to trust God for the possibility of the miraculous in connection with their missions calling. A charismatically-inclined spirituality predominates in the larger sector of twenty-first-century Majority World Christianity due, in part, to the contributions of Pentecostal and charismatic missionaries like Jenny Glassey “who stayed the course.”

The book, which is divided into two main sections, examines the early backgrounds of the Pentecostal Movement, how Pentecostals understood empowerment in the Spirit and went about the work of mission, and how, in a little over a century, Pentecostalism has become a global force in Christianity. Part one, “Pentecostal Power and Missions,” traces the expectation of miracles from the time of the ancient church to the twentieth century. Part two, “Apostolic Power and Missions,” turns to the meaning of *glossolalia* for empowerment for evangelization, the changes that took place in understanding this issue, and the exegetical challenge resident in the insistence of tongues for Spirit baptism. The second section also highlights the contributions of women as founders, administrators, and teachers in missionary education and the substantial part they played in shaping Pentecostal mission strategies.

The book concludes by summarizing the apostolic faith as it stands in the Third Millennium and how interest in the miraculous has changed the landscape of modern missions. Through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostalism survived and expanded into many countries and traditions, becoming a vibrant force in Christianity.

McGee describes the Third Millennium cadre of missionaries as better prepared, more adequately supported, higher educated, and better organized than the early zealots who rushed to the mission fields at the beginning of the twentieth century. Present-day missionaries think more about the theology of missions, work with the established indigenous churches, look positively at teamwork and strategic planning, and make substantial contributions to evangelism, education, and compassion ministries—yet they maintain the same

commitment as the early pioneers. However, the expansion and diversity of Pentecostalism presents them with a new set of challenges.

First, Pentecostalism must no longer be viewed through a single North American lens. Second, North American Pentecostalism must recognize that its charismatic characteristics are hidden in the conformity of success rather than its practicing beliefs in signs and wonders. Third, Pentecostals, famous for their quick actions, need to reflect and theologize more. Fourth, since a more holistic approach to ministry has been tucked under the apostolic banner, Pentecostals must continue to bring reconciliation between groups across racial, cultural, social, and class barriers and contend for deliverance from poverty, hunger, and the damaging effect of systemic evils in the world today. Finally, Pentecostals must retain their evangelistic fervor while grappling with other issues—the need for renewal, Christian unity, and the quest for spiritual power.

McGee’s study reveals a substantial Pentecostal/charismatic fortitude in wrestling with the challenges and in balancing the relationship of renewal to institutionalization. He optimistically declares that this characteristic, crowned with the empowering presence of the Spirit, is the bright hope for a new chapter in the history of world Christianity.

This book will serve well in undergraduate courses on religion, seminary courses in church history and missions, and in doctoral-level courses in historiography and historical method. The plethora of endnotes, containing over 1700 citations, will serve as a springboard for launching further research into a variety of subjects.

*Miracles, Missions, & American Pentecostalism* is indeed what Grant Wacker describes as “historical scholarship at its best ... consistently clear, filled with perceptive one-liners, spiced with telling

quotations, and mercifully free of theological jargon ... uniquely comprehensive in the critical historical literature of the tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Grant Wacker, “McGee’s Final Book Now Available,” *AG Heritage* (2010): 70.