

## *The Quest for the Primitive Church* **Dony K. Donev**

The meaning of life is hidden behind the answers of the existential questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What follows next? The narrow road toward discovering these answers leads to unveiling one's true identity. Such quest is a continuous and perplexed *laborintus vitum*, in which human destiny turns to a painful or pleasant reality. Failure to discover the answers of the above questions is failure to fulfill one's purpose of living.

The era of postmodernity and the present ecclesial paradigm have shifted the role of the individual and community in the search for the meaning of life. The essential errand now is not simple identity realization, but identity preservation and intergenerational transmission. Preservation then is a complex process that includes both the quest for rediscovering one's true identity and the challenge of reclaiming it for the present moment and the future generations. Based on the belief that by rediscovering the original practices and structure of the Early Church community, they would inherit its Spirit and power, a great number of churches have engaged themselves in the quest for the Primitive Church.

This present research will argue for the importance of the preservation of church primitivism as an identity characteristic of the Pentecostal Movement demonstrated through the triangular scheme of prayer, power and praxis. Having shown the original historical context of the Pentecostal message, it will parallel the ecclesiastical paradigm with the spiritual experience, sacramental praxis and communal structure of the Primitive Church. Finally, it will call the church of post-modernity toward neo-primitivism as the

way for preservation and intergenerational succession of Pentecostal identity for the future generations.

### ***I. Toward a Definition of Primitivism***

Webster's Dictionary defines the term *primitivism* as the "belief in the superiority of nonindustrial society to that of the present."<sup>1</sup> The meaning of primitivism can be further expanded to the "belief that the acquisitions of civilization are evil or that the earliest period of human history was the best."<sup>2</sup> The term primitive derives from the Latin word *prima*, meaning first. In a church context, primitivism is the term describing the story of the First Church. Commonly, this includes the period of 30-100 AD.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the general understanding, the Primitive Church is not only the church of the oppressed, unlearned and weak, as it often is applied in the negative understanding of the title Primitive. It is rather the First Church that had directly witnessed the life and ministry of Jesus Christ; it is the Church that possessed the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit since the day of Pentecost; and it is the Church that represents the true identity of Christianity.

The "nostalgic longing for a simpler and purer church" has caused a great number of contemporary Christian movements to engage in the search for the true Christian identity.<sup>4</sup> Republican Methodists, Cumberland Presbyterians, Primitive Baptists and many other movements represented this idea in America.<sup>5</sup> The Church of God was also

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<sup>1</sup> <http://webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/cgi-bin/dict.pl?term=primitivism>

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 221. Cf. Joseph B. Tyson *A Study of Early Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 273.

<sup>4</sup> Matry G. Bell, 'James Robinson Graves and the Rhetoric of Demagogy: Primitivism and Democracy in Old Landmarkism' (Ph. D. dissertation, Graduate School of Vanderbilt University Nashville, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), pp. 44f, 102. Bell, p. 95.

born in the historical presuppositions created by this quest for the Primitive Church. They were all eager to rediscover the original power and relive the original experience.

## ***II. Triangle of Primitive Faith***

The modern call for Primitivism derives from the idea of personal experience with God. There is yet no truth for and about Pentecostalism that does not emerge from experience.<sup>6</sup> Irrational in thinking and in an intimate parallel to the story of the Primitive Church, Pentecostalism combines the discomfort and weakness of the oppressed and persecuted. It is the story of one and yet many that excels through the piety of the search for holiness and the power of the supernatural experience of Pentecost. It is the call for the reclaiming and restoration of “the faith once delivered to the saints.”

Such idea of “looking back to the church of antiquity” derives from a Puritan background and is indisputably Wesleyan. In a letter to the Vicar of Shoreham in Kent, Wesley writes that the parallel between the present reality and the past tradition must remain close.<sup>7</sup> For Wesley, the primitive church was the church of the first three centuries.<sup>8</sup> Equality in the community as in the primitive church was the contexts in which Wesley ministered.<sup>9</sup> Everyone was allowed to preach, both deacons and evangelist, and even women “when under extraordinary inspiration”<sup>10</sup>

Of course for Wesley, the Primitive Church was restored with the Church of England.<sup>11</sup> The main characteristic of restoration was the personal experience of God.<sup>12</sup> It was vividly presented by the Wesleyan interpreters in the quadrilateral along with reason,

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<sup>6</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Rupert E. Davis, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 254.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, p. 538.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, p. 528.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, p. 573.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, p. 538.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley His Puritan Heritage* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), pp. 5051, 65.

tradition and scripture. Such scheme, however, may not be fully sufficient to describe the Pentecostal identity, as well as the paradigm of the Primitive Church.

The experience with God in a Pentecostal context carries a more holistic role which is connected with the expression of the individual's story and identity in both a personal and corporate ecclesial setting. Through the experience then they become a collaboration of the story of the many, and at the same time remaining in the boundaries of their personal identity. Thus, the experience holistically and circularly surrounds the Pentecostal experience of the individual and the community expressed in prayer, power and praxis.

#### ***A. Pentecostal Prayer***

If Pentecostalism has discovered and acquired any of the characteristics of the Primitive Church this would be the prayer of the early saints. Prayer is also the means for universal identification with the Pentecostal movement.<sup>13</sup> The Bible School of Charles Fox Parham in Topeka, Kansas had a prayer tower where prayers were ascending nightly and daily to God.<sup>14</sup> It was through prayer and laying on of hands when around 11 p.m. on December 31, 1899, Agnes Ozman was baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues.<sup>15</sup> Six years later the Apostolic Faith stated that the beginning of Pentecost started with prayer in a cottage meeting at 214 Bonnie Brae.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Conn, *Pillars of Pentecost* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1956), p.11. Cf. J. Brierley, *Religion and Experience* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1906), on The Psychology of Prayer.

<sup>14</sup> *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1 (Electronic Publication at [www.cupandcross.com](http://www.cupandcross.com) - section Resources).

<sup>15</sup> Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1

Prayer was the only way these poor, uneducated and persecuted people could find comfort for their needs and answers for their lives.<sup>17</sup> It was a prayer of expectancy, which acquired the impossible and supernatural. And somehow, in a way, which remains unexplainable, mystic and supernatural, their cry to God was heard and they were indeed empowered.<sup>18</sup>

It was a timeless prayer as they wept all day and night. It was prayer for reclaiming the power from the past; prayer for the present needs, and prayer for the future return of Christ. Prayer was not only the source of divine power, but also as the means for preservation of the power and the identity of the Primitive Church. Prayer was not only the request for power, but also for the personal change and preparation of the believer who was going to receive the power.<sup>19</sup> Connection between power and prayer was in the spirit of the ongoing Azusa Street Revival, whose members earnestly urged to, “Pray for the power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***B. Pentecostal Power***

Theologically, preservation is an agency through which God maintains not only the existing creations, but also the properties and powers with which He has endowed them.<sup>21</sup> Much had been said and written about spiritual power in the second half of the nineteenth century. The theme of “power” was clearly present in the Wesleyan tradition along with the motifs of “cleansing” and “perfection.”<sup>22</sup> The effects of the spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> “Prayer Wanted” *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*, 1 March, 1910, vol. 1, Iss. 1., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A.J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict* (Cleveland: Press of Walter E. Rodgers, 1913), pp. 124-26, 173ff.

<sup>19</sup> Opal L. Reddin, *Power Encounter* (Springfield: Central Bible College Press, 1989), p. 187

<sup>20</sup> *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1907), 2:410.

<sup>22</sup> D. W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), p. 93.

baptism were seen as “power to endure, and power to accomplish.”<sup>23</sup> It was also suggested that “holiness is power,” and that indeed purity and power are identical.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it was recorded that in the midst of this quest for the supernatural power of the Primitive Church, the believers in Topeka, Kansas searched “through the country everywhere, .... unable to find any Christians that had the true Pentecostal power.”<sup>25</sup> The *Apostolic Faith* began its broadcast of Pentecost with the words “The power of God now has this city agitated as never before. Pentecost has surely come ...”<sup>26</sup> It further explained that the cause for this miraculous occurrence was that “many churches have been praying for Pentecost, and Pentecost has come.”<sup>27</sup>

This power found expression in glossolalia, spiritual gifts, miracles and healings. Since, it was physically manifested in the midst of the congregation it was holistically experienced by the Christian community, and that was enough proof for its authenticity. But the power had more than just physical manifestations. It was their only explanation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was their proof that He indeed was the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Pentecostal power produced results in real-life conversions, affecting the growth of the small church in the mountain community. It was a power for witness.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Asa Mahan, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost* (New York: Palmer and Hughes, 1870), p. 52ff.

<sup>24</sup> Phoebe Palmer, *Pioneer Experiences* (New York: W.C. Palmer, Jr., 1868), p. vi.

<sup>25</sup> W. J. Seymour, *Apostolic Faith* 1.1 (1906), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Contrary to Tyson who claims that the confusion among the disciples was because of the lack of explanation of their present situation. Cf. Joseph Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Tomlinson, p. 211.Conn, p. 31f.

### *C. Pentecostal Praxis*

Although the primitive communities were not the same everywhere, three practices were common for all: sharing of possessions, baptism, and communion.<sup>30</sup> They were accompanied by the early liturgical formulas as amen, hallelujah, maranatha, etc.<sup>31</sup> For Pentecostalism, however, the list was much longer. This distinct set of physical and emotional occurrences based on the spiritual experience in the ecclesiastical context of the divine presence included glossolalia, joy, excitement, tears and laughing, shouting and screaming, running, rolling and falling, trances and visions, prophecies, tongues and interpretation, healing and deliverance of possessed, miracles and wonders and even resurrections.<sup>32</sup>

It would have been easier to define and reconstruct the basic list of church practices if at least a minimal structural system, formal government or doctrinal statements existed. Both the Primitive Church and the Early Pentecostalism, however, lacks all this. It was this deficit that creatively shaped the identity of the Church and presupposed its further search for primitivism. In a parallel to the Primitive Church, doctrines and formal teachings came later only to preserve the already formed identity based on the prior experienced divine interventions.<sup>33</sup>

As such, the religious practices were more experiential than doctrinal. They were both present in the atmosphere of worship and in the daily lives of the believers. It was

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<sup>30</sup> Tyson, p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> T.L. Lowery, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (n/a: Lowery Publications, 1977), p. 61f.

<sup>33</sup> *Word and Spirit A Monastic Review vol. 1 In Honor of Saint Basil the Great* (Still River, MS: St. Bede's Publications, 1979), p. 137.

the ecclesiastical necessity for preservation based on the understanding of the Primitive Church that brought unto existence practices and doctrine in Pentecostalism.<sup>34</sup>

### ***III. Preservation of Pentecostal Primitivism***

Preservation constitutes the Christian answer of the questions of the meaning of the whole.<sup>35</sup> The unprecedented reality of ecclesial primitivism is evident in the Christian identity. Naturally, identity is not a constant characteristic; therefore, it is not universal. Thus declared postmodernism.<sup>36</sup> The ever-forming identity's then is a subject of the context within which the Christian community is born and exists. The context of the Primitive Church is easily identified in the threefold formula of persecution, presence and parousia.

Persecution was the present reality of the Primitive Church. In the three centuries before Constantine ten imperial persecutions took place under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, Septimus Servius, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian and Diocletian.<sup>37</sup> While constantly persecuted, the Primitive Church saw itself as a natural continuation of the true Israel's. The early Christians were then the proper heirs of the wilderness covenant and as such assumed all benefits and responsibilities of the covenant. Contrary to the original intent, however, persecution only served as a tool for preservation of the faith of the Early Christians, where only the true ones remain faithful to their beliefs. The true Israel was again in the wilderness, but instead of Pharaoh and his

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<sup>34</sup> Nils Bloch-Hoell, *The Pentecostal Movement* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), p. 164f.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> G.D. Voorhis, *On the Book of Revelation* (n/a: n/a, 1988), p. 9. Conzelmann, pp. 59-62. Cf. Philip Carrington, *The Early Church*, vol. I, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1957).



army, this time their persecutor was the traditionally accepted religious system of which they became aware critics.<sup>38</sup>

Like the cloud in the wilderness, the presence of God was assumed as the only comforting and directing power for the Christian community. The idea of comfort was possible only through the future and yet present hope of parousia. This expectation is described with the Aramaic term *maranatha* translated as: “Lord, come,” as a prayer for Christ’s return or “Our Lord has come,” as a confession of His coming in humility, and “Our Lord is come,” i.e., is present in worship.<sup>39</sup> As a recognized formula in the first Christian community it serves both as a confession of the presence of the exalted Christ and fervent and an expectant cry for His coming again in glory.<sup>40</sup> As such, it reflectively describes the dynamics of the Primitive context.

The change of context is a subject to a compound collectiveness of spiritual, ecclesial, economical, governmental, social and political formations and deformations, and as such it is uncontrollable by the individual. For the church, however, identity must remain the same in order for the Church to identify with the story of Christ. The complexity of such preservation is satisfied through the message of the Church.

Three major primitive developments have been accredited to the Pentecostal message: primal piety (holiness), primal speech (glossolalia), and primal hope (eschatology).<sup>41</sup> It is also important to note that, “long before the Spirit was an article of

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Kittel, Gerhard, and Friedrich, Gerhard, Editors, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985) in Logos Bible Library. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p. 839.

<sup>40</sup> Robert M. Mulholland, Jr. *Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1990), p. 341. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study – New Testament* (Iowa Falls: Word Bible Publishers, Inc., 1992), p. 943.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), p. 82.

doctrine, it was a fact of experience in the primitive church.”<sup>42</sup> As the believers first experienced the blessings of God and then compared their experience with Scripture, their message was more pragmatic than dogmatic.<sup>43</sup>

The Pentecostal movement rediscovered and reclaimed what they believed was the original message of the Primitive Church. “Full Gospel,” as they called it, including justification, sanctification, healing, the second coming and spirit baptism.<sup>44</sup> Yet, Scripture was constantly present in the search and at the finale, the five characteristics came together to form a distinctive message representing the “Everlasting Gospel.”<sup>45</sup>

Reflecting on the sociological setting and cultural context, the message of the Pentecostalism was against the social attitude of sinfulness and for the ecclesial context of primitivism, meaning restoration and preservation. Eight characteristics of this early message must be preserved in order for Pentecostalism to remain in its primal identity. They are as follows: Order of salvation, Circumcision of the heart, Jesus Christ, The Trinity, Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Initial evidence, Return of Christ and Healing.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Epilogue: Toward Neo-Primitivism***

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the quest for the Primitive Church was a search for social identity and a connection with primitive Christianity. What the Pentecostals experienced was not anything new or unknown for the Church; it was new and unknown for them. Thus, it was not that they discovered God, but it was that God

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<sup>42</sup> John A. Sims, *Our Pentecostal Heritage* (Cleveland, Pathway Press, 1995), pp. 108-09. Cf. Schwezer’s article on *pneuma* in Kittle’s *Theological Wordbook of the New Testament*, vol, VI, p. 394.

<sup>43</sup> Sims, pp. 98-99, 106-07.

<sup>44</sup> Land, p. 18. Conn, *Like A Mighty Army*, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. William D. Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> R. Hollis Gause, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Lecture, Church of God Theological Seminary: Cleveland, TN: 7 September, 2000).

discovered them. The quest for the Primitive Church resulted in a quest for discoursing self-identity and a process of self-realization.

In the beginning of the twenty first century Pentecostalism is the fastest growing Christian movement, and is expected to be larger than Catholicism by 2030. Yet, the quest for the Primitive Church continues as a search for ecclesiastic reality and ego realization. Since reclaiming of past moral values, ideas and praxis is shown insufficient, in order to reclaim the basics principles of faith and praxis, which are the corner stone of its uniqueness, Pentecostalism must combine the idea of restoration with the idea of preservation of the primitivism and identity of the Christian Church. The conclusion of this research therefore is a call for neo-primitivism.

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