

Church of God Primitivism **Dony K. Donev**

*“... a church which has lost its memory of the past can only
wander aimlessly in the present and despair in its future ...”*

John A. Sims¹

Since the death of the twelve apostles, the goal of the Christian Church has been to preserve its original teachings and praxis in order to keep its Christian identity. Generations have experienced the need of rediscovering and reclaiming the faith “once delivered to the saints” and the supernatural, divine power described in the Holy Scriptures. Often, historical ages and thought formations have created contexts in which both individuals and communities have been able to search for the original Christian experience. Only a few have been persistent and patient enough to find it. Strongly dedicated to their pursuit, such movements have often been incompatible to the existing ecclesial structures and have become their radical critics and even reformers. For this reason, they have been excommunicated from the commonly accepted orthodoxy and persistently persecuted as radical, fanatic and mystical. And while heretical in their approaches, they have become heroic in their dedication to restore and preserve the true, original Christian identity of the Primitive Church. At the end of the nineteenth century such a movement was the Church of God.

The purpose of this present research is to show that as a restoration movement, the Church of God attempted to return to the primitivism of the apostolic church, through the prayer, power and praxis of Pentecost. The outline followed, will provide a brief

¹ John A. Sims, *Our Pentecostal Heritage* (Cleveland, Pathway Press, 1995), pp. 61-62.

definition of the term primitivism in both a social and ecclesial contexts, and it will then draw a parallel between the Apostolic Church and the early Church of God. The research will conclude with a redefinition of the term and goal of Biblical primitivism.

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."² 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."³ 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.⁴

Contrary to the general understanding, the Primitive Church is not only the church of the oppressed, unlearned and weak, as it is often 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.

A great number of contemporary Christian movements have engaged in the search for the true Christian identity, eager to rediscover the original power and relive the original experience. The Church of God was born in the historical presuppositions

² <http://webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

³ <http://www.dictionary.com/cgi-bin/dict.pl?term=primitivism>

⁴ 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.

created by this quest for the Primitive Church, which began as “a nostalgic longing for a simpler and purer church.”⁵

The Primitivism Movement began in England as a critique and protest against the Protestant Reformation as being insufficient for the complete revitalizations of the Christian Church. Among its first and most prominent representatives were the Early Plymouth Brethren. In their stand for primitivism and piety the Brethren opposed the Church of England as evil, dysfunctional and sinful. Their rejection of Oxford was similar to anti-Erastianism.⁶ Eschatology was uniquely expressed through the studies of John Darby.⁷ They specifically accented on the “sinners justification” as the way to diagnose ecclesial apostasy.⁸

Similar focus is evident in the formation of Primitive Methodism represented by a movement called the Primitive Methodist Connexion.⁹ It was founded on the diverged views for ministry emerging from the contrast between primitive and new. It was also often called Rainterism because of its focus on open-air preaching, closer cooperation with the laity, diligence in house visits, cottage prayer meetings and service to rural societies.¹⁰ Like Wesley they, searched for revitalization of religion from within the existing ecclesial structure.¹¹

⁵ 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.

⁶ James Patrick Callahan, *Primitive Piety* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), p. 97ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61, 106-118.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁹ Often referred to as the Exodus. Cf. Joseph Ritson, *The Romance of Modern Primitivism* (London: Primitive Methodist Publishing House, 1909). Also, Julia S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 75.

¹⁰ Werner, pp. 15-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Primitivism often appealed to the perfectibility of persons, thus it was linked to holiness.¹² Of course, piety and puritanism cannot be separated from John Wesley's search for holiness and sanctification. Alike Pentecostalism, Wesley's concern was the restoration of the "apostolic faith." It must be pointed out however, that Wesley's search for primitivism had more to do with the restoration of original practices and church order, rather than spiritual experience i.e. baptism in the Holy Spirit, glossolalia, gifts, etc.¹³ Nevertheless, Wesley's impact on the doctrine of sanctification as a separate experience was fundamental for the rise of the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements. Furthermore, it is also important to note Wesley's foreseeing that when the Church becomes socially and economically comfortable in the world, "the form of religion would remain, but the spirit would wither."¹⁴

American primitivism contradicted the general acceptance of nominal Christianity within the present ecclesiastic reality, with the quest for restoration of the original faith and praxis of the Primitive Church. It generated a two directional impulse of separatist groups, which were not affiliation with any denominations claiming that they were *Christians only* on one hand, and sects who claimed to be the *only Christians* on the other.¹⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century, a great number of movements originated in Primitivism theology. Among them were Republican Methodists, Cumberland Presbyterians, Primitive Baptists and Missionary Baptists.¹⁶ Greatly

¹² Bell, p. 93.

¹³ Donald W. Dayton *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), pp. 40-42. Also Vinson Synan, *The Old Time Power* (Franklin Springs: Advocate Press, 1973), p. 22.

¹⁴ Werner, p. 15.

¹⁵ Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. xiii, 2, 100.

¹⁶ Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), pp. 44f, 102. Bell, p. 95.

discussed was the premium essay Primitive Piety Revived by Baptist Henry C. Fish.¹⁷ In the search for holiness and piety, the move among the Baptists created an atmosphere for the rise of Landmarkism. Among other characteristics, Landmarkism clearly indicated ideas of Primitivism.¹⁸ It was in this context that in 1886 in the mountains of North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee the Church of God emerged.

The beginning of the Church of God was a call for righteousness, an appeal for restoration and a literal return to the Primitive Church. It was the Christian Union committed to “restore primitive Christianity.”¹⁹ Similarly to the Early Church, it began in the context of persecution, presence and parousia, whereas while heavily persecuted the Church of God constantly remains in the presence and guidance of the of the Holy Spirit in a firm expectance the return of Christ. The Genesis of the Church of God was a restoration of the Pentecostal prayer, power and praxis of the Primitive Church.

Genesis of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN): Pentecostal Prayer

If the Church of God has discovered and acquired any of the characteristics of the Primitive Church this would be the prayer of the early saints. It is the means of identification with the Pentecostal movement worldwide.²⁰ The Bible School of Charles Fox Parham in Topeka, Kansas had a prayer tower where prayers were ascending nightly and daily to God.²¹ 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

¹⁷ Published in 1855 in Boston by the Congregational Publishing House. Dayton, p. 73.

¹⁸ Bell, p. 92.

¹⁹ Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects of America* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), p. 100. Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army* (Cleveland, Pathway Press, 1995), p. 12. *Dictionary of the Pentecostal Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 197.

²⁰ Charles W. Conn, *Pillars of Pentecost* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1956), p.11.

²¹ *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1 (Electronic Publication at www.cupandcross.com - section Resources).

speaking in other tongues.²² Six years later the Apostolic Faith stated that the beginning of the Pentecost started with prayer in a cottage meeting at 214 Bonnie Brae.²³

For the Church of God as well, prayer was the only way these poor, uneducated and persecuted people could find comfort for their needs and answers for their lives.²⁴ Prayer was their communication with God, and their only way of experiencing the divine and acquiring the supernatural. It was not a sophisticated constructive liturgy, but rather a simple deconstructive experience, where the believer was divinely liberated from the past, present and future doctrinal dogmas and human limitations. Only then was the believer able to freely experience the presence of God. The past pain was gone, the present need was trivial and the future was in the hands of the Almighty. Hope, faith, crying, tears and joy were all ecstatically present in the reality of the prayer, because God could hear and see all.

It was a timeless prayer as they wept all day and all night. It was prayer for the past for their return, reclaiming and restoration of the Primitive Church; prayer of the present, as they presented their daily needs and pains in the throne room of God; prayer for the future as they firmly believed that God would hear and intervene. It was a prayer of great expectance, because only through such prayer the impossible and supernatural could be acquired. It was a prayer accompanied with miracles and manifestations.²⁵ And somehow, in a way, which remains unexplainable, mystic and supernatural, their cry to God was heard and they were indeed empowered.

²² Land, Steven J. *Pentecostal Spirituality A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 16.

²³ *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1

²⁴ "Prayer Wanted" *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*, 1 March, 1910, vol. 1, Iss. 1., p. 8.

²⁵ Cf. A.J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict* (Cleveland: Press of Walter E. Rodgers, 1913), pp. 124-26, 173ff.

It was through a fervent prayer that in the summer of 1886 in the Shearer Schoolhouse in Cherokee County, NC about 130 people received the baptism of the Holy Ghost.²⁶ It was through the prayer that took place in a cottage house, after the model of the Primitive Methodists.²⁷ It was through the prayer in the house of W.F. Bryant and the prayers of the men on the “Prayer Mountain.”²⁸ It was like the prayer in the Upper Room in Jerusalem (Acts 2). It was through the prayer which all seekers of God prayed in their search for His presence, in their need and in their longing for life. It was through the prayer, which reclaims, experiences and preserves the true Christian identity.

Twenty years later, The First Assembly recommended that prayer meetings would be held weekly in the local churches. It also urged for every family to gather together in family worship and seek God, instructing their children to kneel in the presence of the Almighty. In the 1907 Consecration Service both A.J. Tomlinson and M.S. Lemons expressed their desire and willingness to pray as they worked in the ministry.²⁹ It seems that the early Church of God saw prayer not only as the source for divine power, but also as the means for preservation of this power within the church, and thus continuous preservation of 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.³⁰ Connection between power and prayer was in the spirit of the

²⁶ Tomlinson, pp. 209-211. Also Conn, *Like A Mighty Army*, p. xxvii and *Dictionary of the Pentecostal Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 198.

²⁷ Werner, pp. 15-20. Cf. “Bearing His Reproach” *Church of God Evangel*, 20 December, 1919, vol. 10, Iss 50.

²⁸ Conn, *Like A Mughty Arm*, p. 61. Tomlinson, *Answering the Call of God* (Cleveland: White Wing Publishing House, n.d.), p. 16.

²⁹ *General Assembly Minutes 1906-1914* (Cleveland: White Wing Publishing House and Press, 1992), pp. 11, 15, 32-33.

³⁰ Opal L. Reddin, *Power Encounter* (Springfield: Central Bible College Press, 1989), p. 187

ongoing Azusa Street Revival, whose members earnestly urged to, “Pray for the power of the Holy Ghost.”³¹

Genesis of the Church of God: Pentecostal Power

Theologically, preservation is an agency through which God maintains not only the existing creation, but also the properties and powers with which He has endowed it.³² 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.”³³ The effects of the spiritual baptism were seen as “power to endure, and power to accomplish.”³⁴ It was also suggested that “holiness is power,” and that indeed purity and power are identical.³⁵

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.”³⁶ 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 ... [my emphasis].”³⁷ It further explained that the cause for this miraculous occurrence was that “many churches have been praying for Pentecost, and Pentecost has come.”³⁸

³¹ *Apostolic Faith*, Issue 1.

³² Augustine Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1907), 2:410.

³³ Dayton, p. 93.

³⁴ Asa Mahan, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost* (New York: Palmer and Hughes, 1870), p. 52ff.

³⁵ Phoebe Palmer, *Pioneer Experiences* (New York: W.C. Palmer, Jr., 1868), p. vi.

³⁶ W. J. Seymour, *Apostolic Faith* 1.1 (1906), p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The central understanding of the spiritual power was as enduement for ministry.³⁹ According to this interpretation, Christ's promise in Acts 1:8 was seen fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. It was intergenerational power to experience God's grace for the moment, but also to preserve it for the generations to come, as Peter stated, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call"(Acts 2:39).⁴⁰ Furthermore, this power was interpreted as an integral part of the ministry of the Primitive Church. Since it had been lost in history, it was needed again and an immediate reclaiming was necessary. It was both an individually and corporately experienced power as it focused on both personal holy living and witnessing to the community.

The Church of God accepted both the sanctification and baptism characteristics of the power, but it interpreted the sanctification separate from the baptism with the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Sanctification was divinely initiated and perfected. It was not through the believer's self-discipline, as Wesley taught, but through the power of God alone, that the believer could be sanctified and continue to live a sanctified, free of sin life. What was experienced in 1896 was definitely Pentecost, and not just any Pentecost, but was the Pentecost of the Primitive Church from Acts chapter two.⁴²

Further, interpreting the account of Acts, 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,

³⁹ R. A. Torrey, *The Baptism With the Holy Spirit* (New York: Flaming H. Ravell. [c. 1895 and 1897]), pp. 9-14.

⁴⁰ *The King James Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.

⁴¹ Sims, p. 97f.

⁴² Conn, *Like A Mighty Army*, p, 29.

and that was enough proof for its authenticity. The interpretation included expressions like dynamite, oxidite, lyidite and selenite.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ Therefore, it produced results in real-life conversions, affecting the growth of the small church in the mountain community. It was a power for witness.⁴⁵

It was also the power that gave them strength during the numerous persecutions.⁴⁶ Even when the church building was burned to the ground and the members were shot at and mocked, the reality of the living Church, as the Body of Christ, remained unscathed. The promised power brought meaning into the life of the Church of God.

Genesis of the Church of God: Pentecostal Praxis

Preservation constitutes the Christian answer of the questions of the meaning of the whole.⁴⁷ Pentecostalism has been granted three major primitive developments: primal piety (holiness), primal speech (glossolalia), and primal hope (eschatology).⁴⁸ These were the primary consistencies of the Pentecostal message. It is also important to note that, “long before the Spirit was an article of doctrine, it was a fact of experience in the primitive church.”⁴⁹ Thus, the message was pragmatic, rather than dogmatic.

The message of the Primitive Church was delivered mainly through speeches (Acts 2, 7, 17, 20, etc.) and communal discussions of examples of the Bible (Acts 7; Heb.

⁴³ Wade H. Phillips. Lecture (Church of God Theological Seminary: September 14, 2000).

⁴⁴ Contrary to Tyson who claims that the confusion among the disciples was because of the lack of explanation of their present situation. Cf. Tyson, p. 276.

⁴⁵ Tomlinson, p. 211. Conn, p. 31f.

⁴⁶ Tomlinson, p. 211. Conn, *Like A Mighty Army*, p, 35f..

⁴⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 120.

⁴⁸ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), p. 82.

⁴⁹ Sims, p. 108-09. Also see Schwezer’s article on *pneuma* in Kittle’s *Theological Wordbook of the New Testament*, vol, VI, p. 394.

11). It contrasted the present experience with the former lost conditions in a before-after contextual method (Rom. 7-8) and served as a practical instruction of the Christian walk (Col. 3:5ff.).⁵⁰

The preachers of the Primitive Church followed the example of the Old Testament prophets as they saw the Church as divine continuation and present fulfillments of the Biblical Israel. Their imitation was limited to the verbal expression of the message, but extended with a literal, physical one. The personal piety and ascetic lifestyle were viewed as a return to Old Testament primitivism. As the prophets they were dressed in a scandalous way or often even naked, poor, unknown, living in the desert, but also miraculously fed by the birds, experiencing the presence of God and filled with the power of His Spirit. Their message was simple, but powerful as they preached repentance and a return to God.

The Pentecostal movement rediscovered and reclaimed what they believed was the original message of the Primitive Church. It has been called the “Full Gospel” including justification, sanctification, healing, the second coming and spirit baptism.⁵¹ Of course not all elements came at once. The process of formation of the message preceded the formation of the movement. It was rather a practical and experiential formation, rather than a doctrinal assessment, as the believers first experienced the blessings of God and then compared their experience with the Bible.⁵² Yet, Scripture was constantly

⁵⁰ Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 75. Cf. Tyson, pp. 242-45.

⁵¹ Land, p. 18. Conn, *Like A Mighty Army*, p. 28.

⁵² Sims, pp. 98-99, 106-07.

present in the search and at the finale, the five characteristics came together to form a distinctive message representing the “Everlasting Gospel.”⁵³

Reflecting on the sociological setting and cultural context, the message of the Church of God was against the social attitude of sinfulness and for an ecclesial context of primitivism, meaning restoration and preservation. Similarly to the Pentecostal movement in general, the experience preceded the doctrinal formation proving its divine and supernatural nature.⁵⁴ The message was expressed not only in the social stand of the Church of God, but also in their early practices.

Of course, it would have been easier to define and reconstruct these practices if the church had at least a minimal structural system, formal government, or doctrinal statements. The early Church of God, however, lacks all this. It further seems that it was this deficit that creatively shaped the formational identity of the Church and presupposed its further search for primitivism. Doctrines and formal teachings came later only to preserve the already formed identity based on the prior experienced divine interventions. 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.⁵⁵

As such, the religious practices of the Church of God were more experiential than doctrinal. They were both present in the atmosphere of worship and in the daily lives of the believers. Similarly to the Pentecostal movement in general, it was the ecclesiastical

⁵³ Cf. William D. Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Sims, pp. 97, 100.

⁵⁵ T.L. Lowery, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (n/a: Lowery Publications, 1977), p. 61f.

necessity based on the understanding of the Primitive Church that brought unto existence practices like baptism, communion and foot washing.⁵⁶

The First Assembly (1096) was engaged in a more constructive assessment of the important issue in the Church of God. Their special emphasizes were threefold: personal, family and communal. Prayer and personality (expressed in the discourse on tobacco) were of prime concern, where one could not be a part of the Christian community without living according to its standards. Family worship was also mandatory for the members, as the individual engaged in relationship with God in the context of the family, and thus the church showed its respect for this divinely established institution. The sacramental observation of communion and foot washing in a church setting seemed to be a central experience for the unity of the church. The ecclesial structure was based on the above practices. It was further administrating by the record keeping of the local church, transfer of members and annual assembly. Evangelism and Sunday school were the outreaches of the church that presented it before the local community, and the way the Church of God presented its message to the world.

Eight characteristics of this early message must be preserved in order for the Church of God 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.⁵⁷ Since all practices have their beginning as an experience of this message, it must be preserved.

⁵⁶ Nils Bloch-Hoell, *The Pentecostal Movement* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), p. 164f.

⁵⁷ R. Hollis Gause, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Lecture, Church of God Theological Seminary: Cleveland, TN: 7 September, 2000).

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 Church of God experienced was not anything new or unknown for God; it was new and unknown for them. Thus, it was not that they discovered God, but it was that God 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 the Church of God has grown to be a mega-denomination represented by more than five million members in 137 countries around the world. Yet, even today the question that asks “Are we who we were supposed to be?” remains. Whether or not the Church of God has completed the quest for the Primitive Church is a subject of a different survey. This research, however, concludes with a suggestion for a redefinition, which is required by postmodernity. Since reclaiming of past moral values, ideas and praxis is yet insufficient, it must combine the idea of restoration with the idea of preservation of primitivism and identity. Again, it is a search for ecclesiastic reality as much as it is a search for ego realization. One way or another, in order for the Church of God to continue to be what it was meant to be, it must return to the beginning and reclaim the basics principles of faith and praxis, which are the corner stone of its uniqueness. The twenty first century then calls for neo-primitivism.

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