Primitivism and the Redefinition of Dispensationalism in the Theology of Aimee Semple McPherson

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Dispensational premillennialism, with its belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ, combined with a distinctive form of primitivism or restorationism, to form two central elements of early pentecostal theology. These elements undergirded the theology of the early Pentecostal evangelist and founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Aimee Semple McPherson. While dispensational premillennialism was a dominant theme in fundamentalist circles, restorationism proved itself to be an important force in several nineteenth-century American religious movements. According to Grant Wacker, this primitivist impulse, which Pentecostals often referred to as the "latter rain" theory, preceded and bolstered the Pentecostal version of premillennialism. Their primitivism enabled them to redefine dispensationalism to fit the restoration of spiritual gifts, including tongues and prophecy, into their dispensational scheme. 1

Both dispensationalism and primitivism are ahistorical in orientation. 2 B. F. Lawrence in his 1916 tract, The Apostolic Faith Restored, 11–12, unequivocally states that the Pentecostal movement has sought to return to the New Testament for its doctrinal and ecclesiological positions. He writes that the Pentecostals, unlike the "older denominations, has no prior history, precedents, habits, or customs." The Pentecostal position "leaps the intervening years," and goes "back to Pentecost." The tract is reprinted in Three Pentecostal Tracts New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985.


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would pour out his “Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28). This outpouring of what came to be known as the latter rain (Joel 2:23), involved the supernatural restoration of the purity of the New Testament church. Although the “exploits” of Mrs. McPherson’s life have often been addressed, little attention has been paid to these theological underpinnings of her teachings. After providing a brief sketch of Mrs. McPherson’s life we will explore the ways in which the eschatological and the primitivist components of Mrs. McPherson’s theology contributed to her perception of the church and its historical development. Following a brief sketch of Mrs. McPherson, we will examine her theological presuppositions, especially, as they are contained in her definition of the “foursquare gospel.” Then we will attempt to analyze her eschatological presuppositions. Finally, we will look at her theory of the restoration of the New Testament church. Throughout, we will attempt to demonstrate how dispensationalism and primitivism worked together to lead her to the conclusion that her ministry was a part of God’s final act in human history.

The Life Story of Aimee Semple McPherson

The life of Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) is complex and intriguing. She was not only a Pentecostal evangelist, but she was probably the first Pentecostal celebrity. Even in death she appeared larger than life. Her story begins with her conversion to Pentecostalism at the age of eighteen by a young evangelist, Robert Semple. After her subsequent marriage to Semple, and ordination in 1909 by William Durham, pastor of the North Avenue Mission in Chicago, the couple began their service in China as missionaries. Tragedy, however, soon overtook the young couple, when Robert died of malaria shortly after their arrival. With a newborn daughter, Roberta, to care for, Mrs. McPherson was forced to give up her ministry and return home. For a time her life revolved around her marriage to Harold McPherson and being the mother of two children, Roberta Semple and Rolf McPherson. Yet, the call to ministry remained, and in 1915 she embarked on an itinerant evangelistic ministry, at first accompanied by her husband of four years, who served as her advance man. Eventually Harold tired of life on the road and left his wife to continue on alone. They were divorced in 1921. Aimee’s ministry, however, continued to grow and expand. In 1921 she settled in Los Angeles, which became the headquarters for her ministry.

Aimee Semple McPherson, in many ways, was a pioneer in Christian ministry. She stands out in American religious history as an early advocate of the rights of women to serve in ministry. It has been estimated that forty percent of Foursquare pastors in the early years of the denomination were women. Susan Setta states that even though there were conflicting patriarchal and feminist elements in her thought, she offered a powerful vision of the feminine in religion at a time when