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"Pants Don't Make Preachers": The Image of a Female Pentecostal Minister (Chapter Three of Gender and Pentecostal Revivalism: Making a Female Ministry in the Early Twentieth Century)

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"Pants Don't Make Preachers": The Image of a Female Pentecostal Minister

The goal of this chapter is to show how Woodworth-Etter and McPherson constructed visual representations of themselves as ministers. It begins by discussing how male ministers projected power through dress, and then examines how female ministers negotiated their outward appearance in response to male attire. Then, this chapter demonstrates how Woodworth-Etter and McPherson aimed not to give a female version of male attire, but to give a visual representation of the biblical women that they claimed to be.

"We humans," wrote William LaFleur, "cannot exist without representation."[1] Indeed, images have power to create meaning for church practitioners, provide interpretation of one's life and existence, and connect viewer(s) to a larger worshipping community.[2] Visual sites for meaning making, interpretation, and connection include not only illustrations, paintings, shrines, and monuments,[3] but also the body. The physical form is an enduring instrument of representation as well as a "readily accessible altar or temple" in which devotees claim to house and display the divine.[4] There is more than one way to play this instrument. Some consider the body to be divinely "given" or "natural" and thus not to be altered for any reason.[5] From this perspective, to alter the body is to defile it and deprive it of its spiritual significance.[6] Others see the body as malleable and available for modification.[7] From this perspective, the body is a "ready made canvas" upon which practitioners illustrate their message.[8]

Through the mass distribution of images in print and film, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the body in its given or modified state[9] had unprecedented potential as a medium for revivalist messages. Advertising executive Fred R. Barnard's now famous observation, "One picture is worth a thousand words,"[10]

speaks to the communicative power of images, and it is no coincidence that the phrase was coined in the 1920s. Between 1890 and 1930, Americans were bombarded as never before with images.[11] These portraits created a heightened celebrity culture[12] and communicated much about what it meant to be an ideal American. Through advancements in print technology, photography, and eventually film, advertisers, publishers, and filmmakers provided the American public with countless portraits of American life.[13] Through fan magazines and newspaper articles, filmmakers and radio promoters gave celebrities unprecedented ways to be seen embodying these ideals. As public figures, ministers were not immune to the power of mass media. Indeed, celebrity ministers used their personal appearance to signal the propriety and authority of their office, as well as their own ministerial message.

McPherson once summed up her views on women in the ministry by arguing that "sex has nothing to do with the pulpit and pants don't make preachers."[14] The sentiment was witty, but inaccurate. Traditionally, pants *did* make preachers. American Protestant ministers represented the authority of their male office by their clothing.[15] In the early Victorian era, professionals wore multicolored suits and accessories. The minister's black (or dark colored) suit, free from ornamentation, expensive fabric, and flamboyant color, as well as the conservatively groomed body in it, was intended both to distance Protestant ministers from their Roman Catholic counterparts and to signal the sobriety, unostentatiousness, and propriety of the office.[16] Although the cut and location of buttons changed over time, American Protestant pastors typically wore black suits with white shirts (with the possible addition of pulpit robes or a white clerical collar in high church settings such as Episcopalian or Lutheran congregations).[17]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the meaning of the black, conservatively cut suit had changed. Magazines and advertisements published portraits of ideal men as rugged outdoorsmen or as white business professionals working in middleclass fields such as medicine, the law, and engineering.[18] In these portraits, professional men of all types eschewed the colorful ensembles of the Victorian era and wore dark-colored, simply designed suits.[19] Ministers were no longer distinguished from their professional counterparts because the black suit signaled the expert, up-to-date authority associated with other modern professions.[20]

Turn-of-the-century male ministers appeared aware of the increasing power of image in American public life and keen to use their personal appearance to lend propriety, respectability, and professionalism

to the office. "The pastor's appearance," according to *The Pastor's Guide*, "both as to his person and dress, should be clean and always command respect and esteem."[21] "People expect their pastor to look his part, to dress in keeping with his high calling,"[22] argued one layman, while another cautioned ministers to "magnify your office," with appropriate personal appearance.[23] Male ministers advised one another to provide congregants with a representation of middleclass manliness by being clean (brush their coats, shine their shoes, button their buttons), avoiding "eccentric" dress, keeping their hair neatly (but not too meticulously) arranged, and wearing black, white, or gray.[24]

Many revivalist celebrity ministers augmented the black suit to communicate their version of the muscular Christian message. For example, A. B. Simpson presented hale, dark-suited images of himself in rural settings as evidence of that message. His biographers claimed that his appearance had a number of muscular traits: it was of "sturdy" and "rugged" stock.[25] "One could not fail to see in him," wrote one admirer, "the marks of highest manhood."[26] 1920s revivalist and former professional athlete Billy Sunday traveled with several suits and accessories that complemented his muscular gospel. He tailored his suits to display his physique and allow him maximum movement onstage.[27] Sunday knew that his image was a draw for revivalist audiences, and he regularly took photos in various athletic poses, and helpfully supplied newspapers with his manly image. Similarly, fundamentalist revivalist J. Frank Norris preached frequently about the need to oppose the feminizing forces of modernism through fisticuffs, if necessary.[28] Norris, a Texan, accessorized his suits by wearing cowboy hats and fedoras (a visual signal of cinematic "tough guys"),[29] and carrying a gun to drive the point home.

Revivalist ministers widely distributed images of their manly ministries. Simpson and Sunday had biographers who published their images as well as their life stories. Norris and Sunday's photos often appeared in newspapers. Posters advertising their revivalist meetings often carried images of the ministers in their manly attire.

For female ministers, no traditional attire signaled womanly propriety as well as professional ministerial authority. While women ministers lacked guidance for how to signal their female ministerial identities, for women in general, there were countless portraits of ideal womanhood. *Scribners*, *Harpers*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Life Magazine* published photographs and illustrations of the "American Woman."[30] In print and on film, she was white, middleclass, educated,

and wore the latest in hairstyle, cosmetic, and dress fashions. She was pictured going to college and engaging in a variety of domestic activities such as cooking for her husband, teaching their children, or shopping.[31] Mainstream media images did not include women clothed or working as doctors, engineers, ministers, or any other profession. Unlike male professionals who signaled their professional status by wearing dark-colored suits, there was no generally accepted uniform for female professionals.

A few women of previous generations had attempted to create professional images by imitating men. They developed a version of the suit for professional women, but, while a feminine version of a suit emerged as acceptable womanly wear (for going on walks, going shopping, attending church, etc.),[32] their efforts at portraying themselves as respectable members of the business class were largely unsuccessful.[33] Until the mid-twentieth century, women who wore menswear risked their reputation by having their sexuality being called into question or by being dismissed as an oddity rather than accepted as a professional.[34]

Thus, Woodworth-Etter and McPherson had to find a way of "showing forth the mighty power of God"[35] as pastors without the benefit of a male body or a suit. Rather than try to appropriate professional menswear, both presented images that corresponded to their narrative identities.

The "Plainly Attired"[36] Pastor

Woodworth-Etter represented her warring mother identity with "plainly attired,"[37] old-fashioned, matronly personal appearance. During the 1890s, women discarded the supposedly "unhygienic" Victorian corsets, hoop skirts, and handmade, elaborate clothing, for simpler, mass-produced fashions.[38] Upper-class women often traded the hoop skirts of the Victorian era for bustles and puffed sleeves.[39] They wore their hair long and piled high upon their heads, often augmented with an elaborately decorated hat. Fashionable women demonstrated femininity and sex appeal with corsets, which cinched in their waists and enhanced their busts. Images of graceful, small-waisted, big-busted, college-educated white women like the famed Gibson Girl populated American advertising space.[40]

Maria Woodworth-Etter's typical dress was a simplified, de-sexualized version of turn-of-the-century styles. In contrast with the black suit of the professional male, Woodworth-Etter usually wore crisp, simply cut white dresses. Her unofficial uniform was a plain white dress and

a modest, full-length (usually black) coat. While her more fashionable counterparts wore corsets to display their womanly form, her loose-fitting dresses deemphasized her waist and bust; the sleeves were minimally puffed. Her most flamboyant accessories were a chaste black bonnet and thin white gloves. Woodworth-Etter wore this plain ensemble in and out of fashion and in and out of the pulpit.

During her decades long career, her clothing rarely changed (Figure 3.1). Even though magazine and film images showed hemlines becoming shorter as the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth, she insisted on wearing floor-length dresses.[41] She was loath to accessorize and wore little to none of the lace, ruffles, brooches, "frills and flounces," rings, and other jewelry popular during the era.[42] Woodworth-Etter was equally conservative about her hair. She wore it tightly wound at the top of her head with no elaborate hats, or any other decorative accessories.

Although committed to modesty and averse to flamboyant clothing, Woodworth-Etter was not reluctant to display her image publicly. On the contrary, in every autobiography (some of which were self-published), she provided followers with self-portraits that conveyed aspects of her profession and message. Her conservative, matronly wardrobe signaled white, middleclass respectability in a way that her background and her church services did not. Even though they mocked her "unrefined" language[43] and compared her ecstatic preaching to an exotic "voodoo priestess,"[44] members of the press were repeatedly surprised by her bourgeois look. One such reporter observed that Woodworth-Etter "dressed in no unusual fashion," with "hair worn in a high knot above her head, gray eyes, fairly good-looking. She does not," wrote the reporter, "look like a fanatic."[45]

Modest clothing had deep doctrinal meaning in Woodworth-Etter's teachings. Woodworth-Etter, like other revivalist women, believed that modest clothing had a sacramental function: outward appearance displayed inward godliness and power.[46] Disturbed by what they thought of as sinful modern fashions around them, many revivalists, particularly those of the holiness or Pentecostal persuasion, embraced strict codes of modesty. "The society women," wrote one exasperated holiness writer of early-twentieth-century fashions, "nearly all dress like the women of the Red Light. . . . Of course, women who are virtuous will be looked at, and spoken to, by sporting men, as if she was a fallen woman, if she dresses like the scarlet woman."[47] These codes of modesty were meant to allow women to display their bodies in their most natural, "God-given,"[48] state and thereby sanctify practitioners around them.[49] "When women get saved and a clean heart," wrote

(a)

(b)

Figure 3.1 (a) Maria Woodworth-Etter, circa 1916. Credit: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center. (b) Woodworth-Etter, circa 1922. Credit: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.

one holiness writer, "it takes the sporty dress, lodge pins, frills and flounces out of their wardrobe. Amen."[50] One early holiness pastor and historian wrote that in obedience to I Timothy 2:9's advice to women, "People who got this great grace of sanctification pulled off their gaudy dress, and stripped off their jewelry."[51] Plain dress thus showed holiness people that Woodworth-Etter was unencumbered by earthly concerns for fashion or beauty and that her heart and mind were set toward heaven.[52] This freedom from the world imbued her ministry with spiritual power only available through modest, clean living.[53]

Woodworth-Etter's commitment to plain clothing made its way into her teachings wherein she equated saved people with those who dressed appropriately. Even the ability to speak with God was interwoven with proper clothing. "To pray," wrote one of Woodworth-Etter's favorite commentators on I Timothy 2:9, "is supposed to be in verse 9 and to be connected with 'in modest apparel'."[54] She warned against elaborate accessories or hairstyles and condemned "bangs and frizzes" as "the devil's implements of war."[55] Extravagant clothing was not only a waste of money; it was also a tool of Satan to distract believers from what was truly important. "People washed their clothing," she wrote of the biblical meaning of modest, clean clothing, "This [appropriate, unblemished apparel] was the emblem of purity. This was the sign of the inward cleansing. The people were in a condition to meet God—clean bodies, clean garments. God help us to get the cleansing power."[56] She discouraged her congregants from following the latest fashions and instead encouraged them to follow Jesus and be "clothed with immortality," and "clothed with the glory of heaven," as Paul instructed the Corinthian church in I Corinthians 15:53, and II Corinthians 5:2.[57] She described Jesus and his followers as "clothed in white linen," like those in Revelation 19:8 and 14, and the coming Christ as a man "clothed in power," which was a possible allusion to Jesus' post-resurrection instructions to the church in Luke 24:49.[58]

Clean clothing signaled class distinction as well as spiritual power. Cleanliness was associated with wholesome middleclass values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereas filth was a signal of lower-class "social pathology, filth, and needless disease."[59] Stories of poorly dressed sinners coming to the altar, finding Jesus, and going away well and modestly clothed were typical narratives of Woodworth-Etter meetings. One convert wrote that before she attended a meeting, she dressed her baby in a "'greased cloth', but afterward, I made him clothes like other children."[60] When speaking of the success of one revival meeting, Woodworth-Etter wrote with satisfaction, "The

women and children began to wear cleaner clothes, and came with their bonnets on, and left their dirty aprons at home."[61] These stories indicated that Woodworth-Etter's meetings had power to reform attendees. They may have entered in as members of the lower classes, but they left as respectable, clean, middleclass people.

Holy apparel also served as a buffer between women and the sexual desires of men—a buffer lowered significantly by the introduction into mainstream fashion of skirts that revealed female ankles. Whereas American revivalists were free to admire the "well developed chest," and "broad shoulders,"[62] of her male counterparts, Woodworth-Etter refrained from clothing and undergarments like the corset that gave her audience an opportunity to evaluate the attractiveness of her physique.

Although she adopted a matronly, female look, Woodworth-Etter did not portray herself in photographs as a motherly figure. For example, she did not pose surrounded by children or cooking in a kitchen. Rather, she chose poses that represented her critical mission to fight on behalf of her spiritual children. She positioned herself with one arm pointed up toward heaven and the other holding a Bible. Other times, she posed with one hand pointing upward and another pointing down. Posing with the Bible reminded the viewer of her authority to wield it. Her hand positions illustrated her message about the battle between heaven and hell.

Thus, Woodworth-Etter's personal appearance benefited her ministry in several ways. It served as a visual cue of her identity as a biblical Mother in Israel and her teachings on holiness and modesty. It also gave her and her ministry a visual sense of middleclass respectability. Her posed pictures were portraits of Woodworth-Etter's status as a militant leader engaging in the masculine act of spiritual warfare.

The "White Clad Los Angeles Soul Saver"[63]

Like Woodworth-Etter, McPherson eschewed male professional wear and favored white dresses to black suits. Whereas Woodworth-Etter's holiness and early Pentecostal leanings led her to shun beautification, Aimee Semple McPherson treated her body as a pliable instrument for communicating her romantic bride and bridegroom message. Her personal appearance was constantly evolving to create an image that underscored her status as the leading lady of her flock and as their representative bride of Christ. In her early days as an itinerant preacher, her look was similar to the womanly professional attire that nurses wore (Figure 3.2). "She couldn't afford an expensive dress,"

Figure 3.2 Aimee Semple McPherson in uniform, circa 1924. Credit: Foursquare Archives.

recalled McPherson's daughter Roberta Salter, so she wore a blue and white maid's uniform and accessorized it, "with a cape put on like the Red Cross nurses had."[64]

Her ensemble was simple, but she knew how to make the most of it. "When she rolled into town," said Salter, "she had to have a clean uniform for the next church service and she stopped by the roadside, and washed it in the stream, hung it out to dry…and then when it was dry she ironed it using for the ironing board the backseat of the car. And when she arrived in town, she was beautiful and dazzling. You would have thought she had ten thousand maids at home."[65]

McPherson's uniform did much to promote her middleclass respectability. It was clean and modest, and it gave her a visual association with nursing, a quasi-public acceptable profession for women. The association with nursing gave McPherson a maternal-like role as nurturer who was subordinate[66] to the "Great Physician," Jesus. It also had the potential to heighten her sex appeal in the years following World War I. Nurses were well-known objects of soldier desire in the Great War,[67] and her visual association with that guild allowed

McPherson to capitalize on that kind of appeal. Finally, the uniform harkened back to her respectable Salvation Army roots and she made it the official garb for all female ministers in the Foursquare church.

The simple uniform, however, was out of step with the glamorous celebrity culture emerging from 1920s Hollywood. Therefore, as she gained fame, McPherson departed from earlier women preachers who downplayed their femininity by hiding their curves and refusing to use beauty-enhancing products. Instead, like Billy Sunday, she chose figure-flattering ensembles. Whereas Sunday emphasized his athletic prowess and manly virility, McPherson chose fashionable 1920s clothing that enhanced her feminine sex appeal.

In the 1920s, women's fashions differed from the early-twentieth-century corseted profile.[68] A slimmer, less voluptuous figure replaced the ideal curvaceous woman. Women illustrated their femininity and sexuality by displaying their shapely ankles and calves rather than their small waists and big busts. Hemlines and sleeves also became shorter, as did hair.[69]

Images of women in advertising and film also shifted from the portraits of womanliness popular at the turn of the century. In addition to pictures of women caring for their children in their homes, women were depicted enjoying the world outside.[70] Young women were often shown playing sports, going to college, or grocery shopping. Companionate wives (and future companionate wives) were shown holding hands, kissing, dancing, or even drinking with their husbands (and future husbands).[71]

There was much handwringing among Protestants at the arrival of the "tall, thin, cartoonish young woman preoccupied with dancing, drinking, and necking," that dominated magazine print.[72] Liberals like Harry Fosdick and conservatives like Billy Sunday both criticized portraits of 1920s women enjoying activities that those with supposedly loose sexual morals appreciated.[73] Revivalists, particularly those of the holiness and Pentecostal variety, were also troubled by 1920s images of femininity.[74]

McPherson, however, was unafraid.[75] By all accounts, she embraced the changing fashions. Indeed, she viewed the young generation coming of age in the Roaring Twenties as a field ripe unto harvest. "On the question of flappers," reported the *Boston Daily Globe*, "Mrs. McPherson was content to shrug her shoulders and say, 'I see beyond the cosmetics and the clothes'."[76]

In fact, McPherson embraced many of the same cosmetics and clothes feared by her revivalist contemporaries, and her openness to modifying her personal appearance pushed the boundaries too far for

revivalists who believed that spiritual purity was signaled through an unaltered physique. Her usual 1920s and early 1930s pulpit clothing consisted of form-fitting (sometimes sequined) white gowns with long, wide sleeves. “She clings to white,” observed one sarcastic observer, “and the fabric clings to her.”[77] McPherson’s image as a bride waiting for her bridegroom was clearly understood by reporters. When she took the platform, she did so, “Wearing the garb and manner of a bride on her honeymoon.”[78]

McPherson’s white gowns were not the only signature aspect of her look. She was not afraid to experiment with the latest beauty products. She employed her own “beauty specialists,” including a hairdresser and makeup artist to make sure she looked “like her old self,” from the pulpit.[79] In addition, flowers were a staple of her apparel. She was often photographed wearing a corsage or carrying a large bouquet. She accessorized with a sequined stole that was designed to rest over her breasts, and she wore glittering symbols such as a cross, a bible superimposed over a shield, or a Foursquare emblem across her chest. The result was a clerically inspired evening gown that fit in nicely with the glitz and glamor of early Hollywood culture (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 McPherson gowned, circa 1933. Credit: Foursquare Archives.

Arguably the most symbolic aspect of McPherson's person to change over time was her hair. Early-twentieth-century revivalists were particularly interested in the relationship among hair, godliness, and worldliness.[80] Long, undyed hair symbolized the "natural" femininity of sound revivalist teaching, while bobbed hair was worn only by those "stupefied by some Satanic opiate" of the "fashions of the day."[81] When McPherson began her career, she had "high-piled, unshorn dark hair."[82] Eventually, she began to experiment with her hair color and it attracted national attention. Newspapers reported that she wore it red,[83] strawberry blonde, and platinum.[84]

Changing her hair color was newsworthy, but as long as McPherson maintained her long locks, she remained relatively uncontroversial. By wearing long hair, she communicated to her flock that she had not completely given herself over to "worldly" cultural norms (Figure 3.4). Given her penchant for sartorial trends, it was inevitable that McPherson would cut her hair into a fashionable marcelled bob (Figure 3.5). In 1927, she did just that.[85] The cut was front-page news, and it was cited as the primary cause in a church split.[86] "Mrs. McPherson hurt her followers beyond endurance," said choir leader and church defector Gladwyn Nichols, "when she had her hair bobbed recently."[87]

Figure 3.4 McPherson's long tresses in 1923.

Figure 3.5 McPherson's sleek bob, circa 1933. Credit: Foursquare Archives.

Had McPherson's teachings about personal appearance, worldliness, and the power of the Holy Spirit been similar to Woodworth-Etter's, Nichols' splinter church would have probably been large and their absence would have damaged her church. Because she had been gradually embracing 1920s fashions, however, many of her followers were willing to stay with her after the bob scandal. The fact that her congregation did not crumble shows a marked shift in Pentecostal revivalist thinking about the relationship between the believer and the world. Unlike first-generation Pentecostal revivalists who usually adopted strict modesty codes, McPherson and her growing circle of colleagues and followers were much more comfortable with fashion. Instead of seeing it as a mark of spiritual deficiency, they used fashion as a tool in service to their revivalist messages.

McPherson was not the only one who was changing her theological tune about the relationship between modest attire and spirituality. Other Pentecostals were beginning to become weary of the strict boundaries around personal appearance that holiness preachers erected. "We criticize each other's dress and clothes as if the kingdom of God depended upon these things," complained Pentecostal

preacher Charles Price.[88] Price went on to argue that modesty was secondary to other theological truths rather than an essential reflection of God-honoring living. "We get into the habit of paying more attention to the way some woman does her hair than we do to the fact that thousands are dying around us on every hand and side without God and without salvation. Mark you, I believe in modesty in appearance, yet there are some people who seem to appoint themselves as guardians of other people's rights and liberties to such an extent that dissention is stirred up and the work of the Lord is impeded and marred."[89] Thus, with her short hair and fashionable gowns, McPherson's power and congregation continued to grow.

At the height of her fame and influence in the 1920s, McPherson combined the Hollywood glamor of the emerging film industry with popular, bridal images of womanliness. She took on a number of leading lady roles from the pulpit, and she had costumes that corresponded to each. In some sermon illustrations, she played the part of biblical brides such as Ruth and Rebecca (Figure 3.6).[90] For these parts, she dressed in "authentic Arab garb" that she had

Figure 3.6 McPherson as Rebecca. Credit: Foursquare Archives.

purchased on a trip to the Holy Land.[91] Taking full advantage of her Hollywood surroundings, McPherson frequently called upon film industry costumers to create elaborate costumes with which to illustrate her sermons.[92] Playing the role of a Southern belle in one sermon, she wore a professionally designed antebellum dress (Figure 3.7). On another Sunday, McPherson told a Dutch folktale about a leaky dike. She preached the entire sermon dressed in a Dutch girl costume. When she preached a sermon about staying away from the dangers of sin, she had a tailor-made police officer uniform made to reinforce her message, "Stop! You're going the wrong way!" Her famous sermon about her small town Canadian roots came complete with a farm girl costume.

In many cases, McPherson's costumes bore strong resemblance to popular 1920s films. For example, the farm girl costume was similar to Mary Pickford's clothing in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1918).[93] Her biblical costumes were similar to those worn in biblical epics like *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* (1925).[94] Thus, when her

Figure 3.7 McPherson as a Southern Belle in the illustrated sermon, "Slavery days," circa 1926. Credit: Foursquare Archives.

followers looked at their pastor, they saw images taken directly off Hollywood studio lots,[95] and when McPherson preached, she was often compared to romantic film heroines like silent movie star Mary Pickford.[96]

McPherson's image was ubiquitous in the 1920s. Pictures depicting a perfectly coiffed pastor wearing the latest fashions appeared in *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers as well as her church building's façade. She graced the cover of magazines, postcards, and her own denominational literature and autobiographies. She sat for numerous publicity photographs and even advertised her meetings in film shorts.

McPherson showed her skill at manipulating her personal appearance during her 1926 trial. On Tuesday, May 18 of that year, McPherson disappeared while on a trip to Ocean Park Beach. Her followers believed that she had drowned. McPherson's mother Minnie Kennedy and church leaders held beachside vigils for several days, and when efforts to recover her body failed, they planned an elaborate funeral.[97] Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Police Department poured hours into a search for her body.

The search became something of a national pastime, and McPherson sightings ran rampant. Some speculated that she had run off to Canada, while others thought that she had left for China.[98] *Time Magazine* satirized the obsession with finding the beautiful pastor: "Her description has been so minutely detailed that it is certain she prepared to go in swimming. Her bathing suit had a white edging around the armholes. It was a one-piece suit with the pretense of a short skirt. The trunks came down almost to her knees. Her legs that day were vague."[99]

On June 23, McPherson came back to the public in dramatic fashion. Emerging from the Arizona desert, she claimed to have been kidnapped by a small ransom-seeking gang.[100] Her congregation rejoiced and showered her with affection and flowers,[101] but from the moment of her reappearance, those outside of her flock were suspicious that McPherson was not telling the truth.

Police searched for the shack in Mexico from where McPherson supposedly escaped. They found no evidence of its existence. Many speculated that she had a personal relationship with her former radio engineer Roy Ormiston,[102] and Los Angeles buzzed with rumors that she had left her pulpit to share a romantic "love nest"[103] at Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. Several Carmel-by-the-Sea residents claimed that they had seen a man with an attractive redhead matching McPherson's description in a romantic cottage.[104]

The rumors of McPherson's alleged sexual indiscretion eventually brought her into conflict with the law. Los Angeles District Attorney Asa Keyes believed that she had run off with Ormiston. He charged McPherson with criminal conspiracy and perjury for allegedly hiding her ten-day affair with Ormiston and sending Los Angeles police on an expensive wild goose chase.[105]

Keyes portrayed McPherson as a highly sexed vixen who seduced a man and ran off to a "love nest," in Carmel-by-the-Sea.[106] McPherson visually countered this depiction in several ways. First, on her first day in court, she eschewed her "picturesque temple garb," and wore instead to court a sober "simple black satin coat suit with soft white shirtwaist and a plain black mushroom straw, high crowned and banded in grosgrain ribbon."[107] For the duration of the trial, she usually wore an equally somber ensemble or the simple, modest Foursquare uniform.

Second, she gave the press images of piety that reminded viewers of her divine relationship. During her trial, she often posed in prayer, with her eyes lifted up toward heaven.[108] She had moments of frustration and "hysteria" outside the courtroom, but during her hearing, McPherson looked angelic and serene.[109] On the first day of her testimony, she augmented her heavenly look by arriving flanked by several young women dressed in white and carrying hymnals.[110] The women, fiercely devoted to McPherson, were pictures of purity and innocence even as their leader faced accusations of fornication.

McPherson also published a series of pictures that depicted her supposed kidnapping. These portraits showcased a modestly dressed figure in poses that mirrored those struck by silent movie heroines. Like Christine Daaé, who struggled to break free from the Phantom of the Opera[111] or Nanette Roland who was endangered by the obsessive love of the villainous Buck McDougal,[112] McPherson's photographs told a story of an innocent damsel in distress who narrowly escaped becoming a victim of corrupt mercenaries.[113] She published poses of herself being kidnapped, tied up, cowering in fear, and then ultimately sneaking away, and then helpfully provided them to her followers and to the national media.

Thus, while McPherson did not subscribe to Woodworth-Etter's notion that plain clothing was the key to spiritual power, she did understand its usefulness and actively modified it to suit her needs. Her openness to bodily modification for the purpose of communicating her message was such that she was rumored to have undergone plastic surgery to preserve her youthful, bridal look. "You see," her estranged mother and former church administrator "Ma" Kennedy

told reporters about rumors of McPherson's face-lift in 1930, "Sister believes that everyone is an instrument of the Lord that may be used if His purposes are to be accomplished. According to her philosophy, a plastic surgeon, by making her more beautiful, would be helping along the Lord's work with a modern miracle of science."[114] McPherson never publicly admitted undergoing such a procedure, but she was undoubtedly committed to maintaining her image as a "well-gowned, flashing-eyed and well-preserved" leading lady.[115]

Conclusion

Woodworth-Etter and McPherson were able to present ministerial images for their congregations without wearing masculine professional attire by providing followers with images that corresponded to their biblical identities as well as popular images of womanliness. For holiness woman Woodworth-Etter, who believed that attempts to change the body were "worldly," that meant presenting herself as a plainly dressed, matronly figure. For McPherson, to whom the body was a blank slate upon which she communicated her revivalist message, she portrayed herself as an increasingly feminine Hollywood bride awaiting her eschatological bridegroom.