



that restorationism is false. The church has never been perfect—far from it—but ever since Christ established it, the church has always existed in some form.

### The Gospel: Freedom in Christ

The New Apostolic Church is a tragic case of a group of people getting so far off track from the essentials of a sound faith that they eventually lost sight of the *good news—the gospel*. While recognizing that human beings cannot save themselves and therefore need the grace of God, the NAC has severely undermined the gospel by making grace dependent on their apostles and sacraments. For New Apostolics, salvation requires submission to the Chief Apostle, acceptance and strict obedience to the new apostles’ teachings, regular participation in NAC services, and the reception of grace through the apostles and their ministers.

The biblical gospel is a message of freedom in Christ. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1 NASB). The evidence of Christian faith is not attendance at meetings, submission to religious leaders, or participation in religious rituals. Rather, the evidence of genuine Christian faith is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), a life of growing in the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23).

We plead with members of the New Apostolic Church to follow Paul’s direction: “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of

evil” (1 Thess. 5:21–22 NIV). Make it your purpose to know the truth about Christ and what it means to follow Him above all else, because “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 ESV).

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *House Rules and Creed for the Members of the New Apostolic Church* (1966; English ed., 1969), 2-3. For full documentation of the quotations in this study, please contact the Centers for Apologetics Research.
- <sup>2</sup> *House Rules and Creed*, 15–16.
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Kraus, “Completion Work in the New Apostolic Church” (1978).
- <sup>4</sup> *Questions and Answers concerning the New Apostolic Faith* (1966, reprint 1978), 78, 79.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Leber, “How We Understand the Bible,” *African Joy*, Nov. 2009, 4.
- <sup>8</sup> *Confirmation Manual: New Apostolic Church*, 7.
- <sup>9</sup> *Questions and Answers*, 74.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, 91.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 97.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 101; *House Rules and Creed*, 16.
- <sup>14</sup> *Questions and Answers*, 106.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–111.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

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## WHAT IS THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH?

The New Apostolic Church is a controversial sect that claims to be the only true Church, led by living Apostles. This claim, the group’s other doctrines, its record of false predictions about Christ’s return, and some of its unusual practices are cause for concern. This brief paper describes the origin of the sect, explains its teachings, and offers a biblical evaluation. Our intent here is not to attack the people in the movement. Rather, we want to offer information that will help Christians to be discerning and to encourage members of the group to experience a healthier, sound Christian faith.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The New Apostolic Church traces its history back to the Catholic Apostolic Church (CAC). The CAC started as a group of English Christians in the early nineteenth century who believed that Jesus Christ’s second coming would take place in the very near future. They thought that before Christ returned, the church throughout the world would become united and spiritually strong. They also believed that the church would have the kind of ministers and experience the kind of miracles that the early church did. One of the group’s leaders, Henry Drummond, in 1832 spoke a “prophecy” telling another man, John Bate Cardale, that he was an apostle. The next year, Drummond also became an apostle. By 1836, the group had twelve apostles, and each one was assigned a part of the world that needed to hear their message.

The CAC faced its first major crisis in 1855 when some of its apostles began dying off. Since they expected Christ to return before they had all passed away, the remaining apostles agreed not to recognize any new apostles. The last of their apostles, Francis V. Woodhouse, died in 1901. The CAC quickly began losing members and is now almost entirely gone.

Not everyone in the CAC agreed with the decision to appoint no more apostles. In Hamburg, Germany, a CAC “prophet” named Heinrich Geyer started calling some of the local German leaders as apostles. The English apostles rejected these German apostles and in 1863 excommunicated Geyer and those supporting him. This “Hamburg schism” created a new movement with its own set of apostles and prophets.

One problem this new group had was deciding who was really in charge: Was it the apostles or the prophets? Geyer, the leading prophet, claimed that prophets were in charge, while Carl Louis Preuss, one of the apostles that Geyer had called, argued that apostles were in charge. In 1878, the two factions split, and the faction loyal to Preuss eliminated the office of prophet altogether.



FRIEDRICH KREBS  
first Chief Apostle (1896–1905)

The apostles of Preuss’s faction in 1896 recognized one of their apostles, Friedrich Krebs, as the first “Chief Apostle.” Some people in these churches thought that the idea of a Chief Apostle gave too much authority to one man, and again there was another split. The churches that remained loyal to Krebs as Chief Apostle are really the beginning of what is now known in German as *Neuapostolische Kirche* (in English, New Apostolic Church, or NAC for short).

The NAC suffered at least two major schisms in the twentieth century. Just prior to the First World War two different apostles claimed authority

over the NAC in South Africa. Once the war ended, this dispute led to open division and a formal separation into two sects in 1926, the NAC and the Old Apostolic Church (of Africa).

An even more serious schism started in 1950 when Chief Apostle Johann Gottfried Bischoff began claiming that he would not die before Christ returned. By 1954, the NAC was requiring all of its ministers to agree to this new claim, known simply as the *Botschaft* (“message”). Those who did not were excommunicated; some of these people went into other churches, but many of them banded together and started a new group, the United Apostolic Church. Then, in 1960, Bischoff died. The NAC official explanation was (and is) that Bischoff was correct but that God, for reasons known only to Him, changed His mind.

Since 1960, the NAC has continued to grow in various parts of the world. Scholars estimate that the NAC has about nine million members, mostly in Africa. However, all of its Chief Apostles so far have been either German or Swiss of German descent. The international headquarters of NAC are in Zurich, Switzerland. The current Chief Apostle is Wilhelm Leber.



WILHELM LEBER  
Chief Apostle since 2005

## WHAT NEW APOSTOLICS BELIEVE

### Orthodox Roots

The roots of the New Apostolic Church (NAC) are Christian. Anglicans and Protestants in England started the original Catholic Apostolic Church (CAC) in the nineteenth century. The New Apostolic Church retains much of the doctrine and practice of the CAC.

The NAC clearly affirms some basic elements of the historic Christian faith. The New Apostolic Creed consists of “The Ten Articles of Faith.” The first three of these articles are the ancient Apostles’ Creed with some changes. (We will discuss some of these changes a little later.) These articles affirm that there is one God who created the world, and that this one God is “triune”—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They also affirm that Jesus Christ is both God and man, that he was born of a virgin, died on the cross, was buried, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will return to the earth.

The basic underlying theology of the NAC, then, is Christian. In this regard, the NAC differs from religions like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, neither of which has an orthodox view of God or Christ. **Unfortunately, what the NAC adds to these basic doctrines severely distorts the Christian faith.**

### All about Apostles

Of the remaining seven articles of the NAC Ten Articles of Faith, three focus explicitly on its living Apostles and their functions. These Apostles are of the same type as Peter, James, John, Paul, and the other New Testament apostles. “In the same manner as He elected the Apostles of the Early Church in the past, the Lord has again called Apostles in our times and has sent them out into the world.”<sup>1</sup> The Fourth Article affirms “that the Lord Jesus rules His Church through living Apostles until His return” and that Christ sent those Apostles “to forgive sins in His name.” The Fifth Article states “that all ministrations in the

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Church of Christ are chosen and ordained into their ministries only by Apostles and that all gifts and powers must come forth out of the Apostle ministry.” According to the Eighth Article, “those baptized with water must through a living Apostle be sealed with the Holy Spirit, to receive the right of the firstborn, whereby they are incorporated as members into the body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

**The NAC apostles, then, rule the church on Christ’s behalf, determine who performs what ministries, and control who is part of the church and receives the Holy Spirit. They are indispensable to salvation. During the seventeen centuries when there were no apostles, no one could be forgiven of sins, be born again, or receive the Holy Spirit.**

While there were many Christians during that time, they were such only in name. They could not receive the life out of Christ; because the transmitters of it, the Apostles commissioned by Jesus, were no longer here. No preacher and no minister was empowered to forgive even one sin or to beget one child of God through the rebirth.<sup>3</sup>

**Although the Ten Articles do not mention him, belief in the authority of the Chief Apostle is essential to NAC faith.** Acceptance of the Chief Apostle distinguishes New Apostolics from all of the other Apostolic groups that trace their origins back to the Catholic Apostolic Church of the 1830s. **The NAC claims that the Chief Apostle is “the visible head of the Church...the highest authority in all matters,” and “the Lord’s representative on earth.”** The Chief Apostle maintains unity in the NAC, determines which individuals “are to be ordained as fellow Apostles,” and is authorized to promote “new revelations by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

### New Apostolics and the Bible

The NAC emerged from a conservative Christian tradition that viewed the Bible as the word of God and the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. However, the extreme importance the NAC places on its living apostles detracts from this traditional view of the Bible. As we have just seen, **the Chief Apostle has the authority to announce “new revelations” that the whole church is obliged to accept. The Chief Apostle, not Scripture, is “the highest authority in all matters.**” When the NAC affirms the importance of the Bible, it is careful to put its importance second to their current apostles:

*The doctrine proclaimed by Jesus and His Apostles*, as recorded in the Bible, is the foundation of the faith of the New Apostolic Church. As a whole, the word of the Bible is useful and important as a record of the past, as a reference to the present and future, and as a testimony of Jesus and His doctrine. But the Bible cannot replace the activity of God’s messengers: the proclamation of the doctrine, the bestowal of the acts of grace and the care of the children of God.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Chief Apostles and the other Apostles with him are the living, final authority, they are “best qualified and able to interpret the meaning of Biblical statements and records.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Chief Apostle Wilhelm Leber stated in 2009 that “the Apostle ministry has been given the authority to interpret Holy Scripture. This does not mean that believers will not profit from reading the Bible. But it is the task of the Apostle ministry to interpret the Bible and to provide instruction in faith.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Only True Church

We have just seen that the Chief Apostle replaces the Bible as the highest authority for New Apostolics. Consistent with this perspective, the NAC claims that the Bible testifies that it is the only true church: “The Bible is the book which testifies of the New Apostolic faith and

teaches the children that the New Apostolic Church is the continuation of the one and only church which Jesus Christ established.” The NAC position is clear: “The New Apostolic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ.... the only Church of Christ, its members being the people of God.”

This claim that the NAC is the only true church means that there really was no true church between the deaths of the New Testament apostles and the rise of the new apostles in the nineteenth century. It also means that all Christian denominations and churches outside the NAC are outside the true church.<sup>9</sup>

### Salvation and Sacraments

**The NAC teaches that its ministers alone have the authority from God to administer sacraments. Furthermore, these sacraments are necessary for salvation.** This is a key reason, if not the main reason, why the NAC considers itself the only true church: they alone have the means of salvation. Only apostles and the ministers they ordain “are entitled to administer Holy Baptism.” Baptisms performed in other denominations are invalid, except for those who later join the New Apostolic Church and have their baptism “confirmed” by an authorized NAC minister.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, only NAC apostles and the ministers they ordain may administer Holy Communion.<sup>11</sup>

The most important sacrament in the NAC is “Holy Sealing,” a rite of laying on hands to impart the Holy Spirit that may be performed only by NAC apostles. “The Holy Sealing is the administration of the Holy Spirit and thus the most important part of the rebirth.... In the present time, the Holy Spirit is administered by the Chief Apostle and the Apostles of the New Apostolic Church.” Only those who receive this rite are children of God: “We thereby become children of God and are thus entitled to share Christ’s heritage.”<sup>12</sup> New Apostolics confess in their Eighth Article of Faith: “I believe that those baptized with water must through a living Apostle be sealed with the Holy Spirit, to receive the right of the firstborn, whereby they are incorporated as members into the body of Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

Receiving these sacraments is necessary for salvation, but it does not guarantee salvation. The New Apostolic member must maintain “strict obedience of faith” to the teachings of the Apostles and attend NAC services regularly in order for this “new life” to be “preserved and perfected.”<sup>14</sup>

### Rituals for the Dead

If the Christians (“only in name”) who lived during the seventeen centuries between the New Testament Church and the New Apostolic Church were not validly baptized, were not sealed, did not receive the “rebirth” (being born again) or the gift of the Holy Spirit, and were not incorporated into the body of Christ, then what hope is there for them? The NAC answer is to provide “services for the departed.”

According to NAC teaching, between His death and resurrection “Jesus went into the realm of the dead to preach the gospel there as well.” New Apostolics believe that Jesus’ action here establishes a precedent for ministering on behalf of the dead today: “From the example of Jesus we conclude that after His departure into eternity, His Apostles and servants were to continue the work which He had commenced.”<sup>15</sup> They do this by performing both baptism and sealing on living New Apostolic Church members on behalf of the departed. Thus, the NAC claims, “we know that we can intercede on their behalf before God...so that they too may be saved,” and states that the sacraments “are administered to living vessels who act as deputies for the departed.”<sup>16</sup>

### Expecting the Lord’s Return

Despite the history of their failed expectations concerning the Second Coming of Christ, the NAC still maintains as its official doctrinal position that it will happen soon: “the Church of Christ will in the near future have reached that state of perfection which is necessary for the return of Christ.” When Christ does return, He will bring about the First Resurrection, in which He will unite Himself forever with faithful New Apostolics.<sup>17</sup> Those who did not qualify to become part of this First Resurrection will be given an opportunity in the realm of the departed to become “acquainted with God’s plan of salvation” and to decide “either for or against the Lord.” They will then face Him in the Second Resurrection and Last Judgment.<sup>18</sup>

## WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS

### The Apostles: A *Temporary* Office

**The fundamental error of the NAC is its claim to be led by apostles, including its Chief Apostle.** There are two problems with this claim. The first problem is that the NAC claims to have apostles *of the same type* as the New Testament apostles. This claim—made also by the Mormons, for example—is at odds with what the New Testament itself says. According to Paul, “the apostles and prophets” were the “foundation” of the church (Eph. 2:20), with a very specific purpose. That purpose was to establish the church as a people, with both Jews and Gentiles, united in Christ as members of His body (Eph. 3:3–8). The only persons qualified to do this were men who had seen Jesus after His resurrection and had been commissioned by Him to be His witnesses (Acts 1:21–26; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:5–8). As the apostles approached the end of their lives, they made no attempt to appoint replacements and expressed no complaint about their office disappearing from the earth. Instead, they warned, as Jesus had, about the coming of *false* apostles and prophets (e.g., Matt. 24:11, 24; 2 Cor. 11:13–15; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1–6; Rev. 2:2). The church was to remain faithful by remembering and understanding what the genuine apostles had already taught (2 Pet. 3:1–2, 15–18; Jude 3, 17).

**Second, the NAC apostles claim authority that even the New Testament apostles did not have.** In the New Testament, the apostles were *witnesses* of Christ—individuals who had personally seen the risen Christ and could testify to His resurrection—and *messengers* of the gospel of salvation. The NAC apostles consider themselves *agents* of Christ and *conduits* of salvation. It was so unimportant who performed baptisms that Paul could even thank God that he had not personally baptized the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 1:14–17). Furthermore, the early church had no office of “Chief Apostle.” Peter acted as the leader of the apostles during its first few years, but less than twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection James—if anyone—appears to preside over the Jerusalem council, even though Peter was still alive, active, and present (Acts 15). Neither Peter nor James *ever* claimed to be the head of the church or its highest authority.

### The Bible: The Church’s *Final* Authority

Since the church no longer has living apostles, we should reject the claim that the Chief Apostle is the highest authority in the church today. While Christians should respect godly leaders, **God’s word in Scripture is the final authority for all matters of faith and practice in the church.** It has this authority because it is God’s inspired word (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). The New Testament itself insists that all doctrine must agree with Scripture—even if taught by an apostle (Acts 17:11). According to Paul, anyone—even an angel or Paul himself—who preached a different gospel from the one he had already proclaimed was to be rejected and condemned (Gal. 1:8–9).

### The Church: *One* Head, *One* Mediator

According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is the only head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18) and the only mediator between God and human beings (1 Tim. 2:5). Scripture never assigns these positions, even in a lesser sense, to anyone else. We do not need anyone to “dispense” or “administer” the Holy Spirit or His gifts to us.

### The Departed: In God’s Hands *Alone*

Like the Mormons, New Apostolics cite 1 Corinthians 15:29 to support the notion that Christians should perform baptism on behalf of the departed. In this verse, Paul criticizes the group in Corinth who denied the future resurrection of the dead and yet were baptized for the dead: “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead? And why stand we in jeopardy every hour?” (1 Cor. 15:29–30 KJV). Although scholars have suggested various other explanations for this passage, let us assume that Paul was referring to people getting baptized on behalf of the departed. In context, the people who were doing this were the people who denied that the dead will be resurrected! Paul’s point is that “they” are acting inconsistently with their own beliefs. He is not saying that “we” (or his readers, “you”) perform such baptisms for the dead. While “they” are playing around with baptizing people for the dead, Paul says, “we” are putting our lives on the line every hour for the truth of the resurrection.

The rest of the Bible knows nothing of performing religious ceremonies for the dead or of opportunities for the departed to hear the gospel in the afterlife. “It is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27 NAB).

### The End: *Not* for Us to Know

**Although the NAC acknowledges that no one knows the exact time of Christ’s return (Mark 13:32), its apostles have repeatedly claimed to know the approximate time of Christ’s return—and have been proven wrong.** Jesus Himself warned His disciples that it was not for them to know even the general timing of such events: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:7 NKJV).

The nineteenth-century Catholic Apostolic leaders were sure that Christ would return before they had all passed away—and now the Catholic Apostolic Church itself has almost completely passed away. In the mid-twentieth century, the longest-ruling Chief Apostle in the history of the NAC, J. G. Bischoff, falsely predicted that he would not die before Christ’s return. Shockingly, the NAC leadership was more comfortable concluding that God had changed His mind than they were recognizing that the Chief Apostle might actually have been mistaken. It is hard to imagine any clearer proof that the office of Chief Apostle is an invention of man, not a revelation of God.

### The Faith: *Once* for All Delivered

The New Apostolic view of church history is a classic case of *restorationism*: the belief that the church existed, then disappeared, and then was “restored” in modern times. Various other sects, such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, also make this claim. Yet Jesus and His apostles taught otherwise. Jesus assured Peter and the other apostles that “the gates of Hades” would not “prevail” against the church (Matt. 16:18). He told them to go make disciples of all nations and promised that he would be with them until that task was complete—until the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20). Jude urged his readers “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NKJV). These statements indicate <sup>3</sup>