THE NEW APOLSTOLIC CHURCH

WHAT IS THE NEW APOLSTOLIC 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 Jesus’ 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 would return and that this 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 G. Kitto, 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.

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 Neapostolische 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 1930 when Chief Apostle Johann Gottfried Bischoff began claiming that he would not die before Christ returned. By 1954, the NAC was recouping all of its ministers to agree to this new claim, known simply as the Rotschaft (“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.

WHAT NEW APOLSTOLICS 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 name 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.” The Fourth Article affirms “that the Lord Jesus rules His Church through living Apostles until His return” and that Christ sent these Apostles “to forgive sins in His name.” The Fifth Article states that “all ministries in the
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 Apostolic ministry. According to the Eighth Article, “those baptized with water must through a living Apostile be sealed with the Holy Spirit, to receive the right of the firstborn, whereby they are incorporated as members into the body of Christ.”

The NAC teaches, then, 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 seventeenth 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 sinner or to begit one child of God through the reprobate. Although the Ten Articles do not mention him, belief in the authority of the Apostles is associated with accepting faith in Christ. Acceptance of the NAC distinguishes New Apostolics from all other the 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.”

New Apostles 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 authorize the “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 God is the starting point and guarantee of the church’s authority and stability, the bond of the several parts of the Church of Christ. The NAC considers the Bible the single source of truth, the ultimate word of God. Therefore, the Bible is the only basis for all church doctrines and practices. The NAC also believes that the Bible is the only source of authority for the church, and that all church practices must be derived from it. Therefore, the Bible is the only basis for all church doctrines and practices. The NAC also believes that the Bible is the only source of authority for the church, and that all church practices must be derived from it.

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 all will be reunited forever with the First New Testament Apostles. 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.

What Scripture Says
The Apostles: A Temporary Office
The fundamental error of the NAC is its claim to be led by apostles, including the Chief Apostle. The NAC claims that the only way to “correct” the church is to receive revelations from the Chief Apostle. 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, “one 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. 3:3–4). 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 1:21–24; 1 Cor. 12:1–3; 1 Pet. 2:1). It was the apostles who approached the end of their lives, their task no longer accomplished, and all who were of every tribe, nation, and language, people of every tongue, and every people of every language, and without distinction of race, and inhabited earth (Acts 10:44–45; 11:32). But those who do not qualify to be 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.

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 humanity (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 15:20 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 baptizing the dead: “Do you not know that all who have died are freed from sin?” 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. Christians who believed in such baptism were teaching a heresy: the dead will be resurrected on 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 NAK).

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 largessingest Chief Apostle in the history of the church died, and no one knows what would happen after 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 came to the Church 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 NAK). These statements indicate