

THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Victor Kuligin

Christianity is exploding on the African continent. Some reports have put the number of new Christians every day at between 20,000 and 50,000. By all counts, Christianity has clearly become the majority religion in sub-Saharan Africa.

But such raw numbers can be very misleading. How many of these new believers are being discipled? How many regularly attend church? If we checked back in five years, how many would still consider themselves to be Christians, or how many would bear fruit as disciples of Christ? These are hard questions to answer.¹

One imported church which has enjoyed great growth on the African continent is the New Apostolic Church (NAC). With over ten and a half million members worldwide in over 72,000 congregations, the NAC is a church to be reckoned with. Nearly three-fourths of its membership is in Africa, making it one of the largest single denominations in the entire continent.² The NAC is a European product that has found strong roots in Africa with nearly sixteen times more members in Africa than in Europe.

From the surface, the NAC appears to be just another Protestant denomination, but a deeper investigation yields some disturbing theology and practices in this church. We will take a look at the NAC's doctrines after we provide a brief historical sketch of its origins.

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¹ For instance, *Operation World* reports that Namibia is 92% Christian. However, recent studies done by the Southern Baptists put the number of born-again believers around 10% of the population.

² Most of the information attained in this article comes from the NAC's official websites. For the demographics just stated, refer to <http://www.nak.org/news/20040128-d.html>. This site is in German.

NAC Historical Synopsis

The NAC formed in a very unique manner, so says its official history, *History of the New Apostolic Church*.³ England, Scotland and Germany all contributed to the founding of this denomination. Scotland is the best place to begin our overview. In 1826, a small Bible study and prayer group began to pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit as exhibited in New Testament times. They were convinced of the immanent return of Jesus and prayed for an outpouring of the Spirit like that at Pentecost. They were also praying for revival in the Anglican church.

James Grubb began to prophesy in the Spirit (p. 14), and a woman, Mary Campbell, who had tuberculosis and was near death, began to speak in tongues. James MacDonald, moved by the Spirit, wrote a letter to Campbell telling her that the Lord would heal her and to get up, which she miraculously did. Similar events like prophesying, tongues speaking, visions, and gifts of healing, were also experienced in England around the same time. It was believed that this was the fulfillment of Joel 2: 28-29: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." The *History* reports many such events.⁴

Under the leadership of Edward Irving, the first congregation in London was formed around 1830, and it is for this reason that they were nicknamed "Irvingites." Irving ultimately was kicked out of his Church of Scotland for the events of a charismatic nature that occurred in his church. In another part of the country, William Caird became pastor of a church in Albury which "became the centre of the work of God. Here stood the chapel of the Apostles, here the twelve Apostles lived, and in this chapel each Sunday one of the Apostles celebrated Holy Communion" (p. 24). Along with a church of Congregationalists in Bishopsgate, and an Irish Anglican church in Southwark,

³ The following historical material comes from this publication. There is very little central information on the NAC and one is usually forced to look at individual church websites to accumulate information about the church. The following website provides links to various NAC sites around the world: <http://www.nak.org/text/12-gb.html>.

⁴ We should note that these events took place in a country not accustomed to such charismatic activity, and several decades before the explosion on the world scene of the Pentecostal movement. Given the latter, such events do not seem as strange to us today as they would have in the early nineteenth century.

Albury became one of the three main churches of this “Apostolic” movement. At about the same time, a Catholic priest Johann Lutz, experienced similar “revival” in his parish. It is this interdenominational aspect of the movement which the NAC leadership point to as proof that it was a genuine revival from God.

A key event during this time was a prophecy by Henry Drummond who called John Bate Cardale to be an Apostle. Irving was consulted and he encouraged Cardale to accept this “revelation.” As more such events occurred, the organization that resulted grew to a visible form and became known as the Catholic Apostolic Church (not to be confused with the Roman Catholic Church). The church was comprised of people from a variety of denominations and is considered one of the forerunners to the Pentecostal movement.

By 1833 five Apostles had been called in England and by 1835 there were seven congregations in the area of London. On 14 July 1835, the last of the twelve Apostles was called.⁵ This was considered to be God’s will and it was believed that the Lord would come again before any of these Apostles died. By 1860, though, only six of the Apostles still lived, and in Germany a Prophet of the church there called two more Apostles. The church in Albury did not agree with this ordination and subsequently excommunicated the German church, yielding the Restored Apostolic Mission Church. Many such splits occurred in the Apostolic movement such that today there are over twenty churches that can find their roots in this movement.⁶

Jumping ahead, in 1897 Friedrich Krebs gained enough support to declare the recently deceased Friedrich Swartz the “Chief Apostle.” Another split occurred over this matter, and the New Apostolic Church eventually formed from the followers of Krebs and some other congregations. In 1907 the name New Apostolic Congregation was used for these new churches, and in 1930 the name was changed to New Apostolic Church.

It should be noted that the NAC gives a very pretty picture of its roots, consistently referring to them as the “will of God.” What actually happened around 1830 is tough to discern, but it seems clear that in a generation or two, many saw this movement as a chance to gain power. In his succinct pamphlet

⁵ The Apostolic movement moved to America in 1834 and France in 1835.

⁶ The largest of the split-offs occurred in South Africa and became the Old Apostolic Church, with about six million members in Southern Africa according to 1992 statistics.

Inside the New Apostolic Church, ex-NAC member Stephen Langtry shows that in many key districts in the twentieth century, much of the leadership and hence power of the church has been handed down through certain families (pp. 20-21). The Chief Apostle, so Langtry reports, made over \$1.2 million Rand in 1995.⁷

Key Doctrinal Beliefs of the NAC

One has to understand that the NAC is not like a Reformed denomination or some such group that spends countless hours producing literature that clearly expounds its theological positions. In fact, it is extremely difficult to obtain NAC literature if you are not a member of the church. Most of the following information, then, comes from a few publications from the NAC (the aforementioned *History, Questions and Answers concerning the New Apostolic Faith*⁸, *Our Family, House Rules and Creed*, and *House Rules*), from an extensive interview I had with the Bishop of the NAC in Namibia, and from their numerous websites. We will begin with their view of God.

Doctrine of God: The NAC seems to be very orthodox in this regard. For example: “God is a spiritual, eternal, infinite, triune, perfect and completely independent being. He is the Creator of all earthly and heavenly realms” (#16, *Questions*). There seems to be nothing wrong with their doctrine of God, which would appear reasonable given that the NAC originated from a number of Protestant denominations.

In the section, “Who is Jesus Christ?” (#102, p. 39), it says this: “Jesus is the only begotten eternal Son of God, and the promised Redeemer. Jesus is God and man embodied in one person (see also #115 where it states that Jesus was God and man united). This is clearly orthodox, but is it really what the church teaches? If we dig further, there are some disturbing things discovered concerning their view of Jesus. In my interview with the Namibian Bishop, he

⁷ Stephen Langtry, *Inside the New Apostolic Church* (Claremont, South Africa: Forum Project, 1999). At the exchange rate at the time, \$1.2 million Rand was roughly equivalent to US\$330,000. Langtry has also written about the NAC in an article in *Today Magazine*, “Calling up the Dead,” June-July 1999, 24-27.

⁸ This publication is the closest thing we have to a “systematic theology” of the NAC, and we will rely heavily on it. However, the NAC intends to replace this publication with a new, more thorough catechism, “The New Apostolic Faith.” Per e-mail correspondence with the head of Media relations for the NAC, Peter Johannning, this will not be completed until 2008/2009. “The important message here is that the Church will abolish the book “Questions and Answers” in favour of the new fundamental principles” (<http://www.nak.org/news/20040603-73-gb.html>).

said that the Son was created by the Father and viewed the creation account in Genesis as sort of spiritual metaphor. In other words, on the fourth day God created the sun, moon and stars, and the Bishop likened this to God creating the Son (sun), the Apostles (moon) who reflect the light of the Son, and the children of God (stars). This view is confirmed in Langtry's account (p. 45): "In the outline for Confirmation Class Lesson 5 (p11) and Lesson 24 (p57) the New Apostolic Church says, 'Jesus the light of the World, was created by God before the sun and the moon.'"⁹

To complicate matters, #104 of *Questions* states that Jesus was born of the virgin, a "real human being" (p. 40). So in one place we see it confirmed that Jesus is truly God, but in another place we see that Jesus is viewed as a creature. So which is it?

Could this possibly be a typical characteristic of a cult commonly referred to as "double talk?" In other words, in their official literature the NAC maintains a Trinitarian view of God's nature, but in more private teaching they teach something different? It is difficult to determine at this point what is the official position.

Consulting the ten creeds of the NAC does not help us much either. The first three creeds are just a restatement of the Apostles' Creed, with the remaining seven more closely associated with the NAC.¹⁰

What complicates matters even further is that the NAC prides itself on having ministers with no formal theological training! "Following the example of the Early church all the ministries of the New Apostolic Church are laymen in the sense that they have neither studied theology nor been trained at any theological college" (p. 6, *House Rules and Creed*). As the Bishop of Namibia told me, with a sense of pride, they would rather "rely on the leading of God's Spirit."¹¹ This may sound very spiritual, but we do not have to think very long about it before we realize how much confusion can result from such a practice. It may be one reason why confusion seems to exist as to the nature of Jesus and God.

⁹ On the same page, Langtry also references an educational video circulated by the NAC South Africa (South Western Region) entitled "Vineyard Workers' Seminar" which teaches that Jesus was created on the first day of creation.

¹⁰ Their creeds can be found here: <http://www.nak.org/text/11-gb.html>.

¹¹ This the NAC officially refers to as "timely impulses of the Holy Spirit." See <http://www.nak.org/1e/1e-gb-0105.html>.

The Office of Apostle: There could be another explanation for the lack of theological training of the leadership, and that may be found in the strong authoritarianism found in the position of Chief Apostle of the NAC.

It is the belief of the NAC that the true church of Jesus cannot exist apart from the Apostles to whom Jesus gave his authority. Often it is likened to someone having a key to a door. You cannot go through the door unless someone unlocks it, and the Apostles have been entrusted with the keys to God's Kingdom. In fact, much like the Roman Catholic Church justifies the office of Pope, so does the NAC justify the modern office of Chief Apostle by appealing to Matthew 16:18.

However, the NAC has a different sort of "twist" on it. Unlike the RCC which believes there has been a continual apostolic succession since Peter, the NAC says that the office of Apostle died out with the death of the Apostle John. They cite reasons like persecution of the church and great traveling distances in the Roman Empire, which made it impossible for John to appoint a successor (#187 and #188 of *Questions*). To make matters worse, not until the Apostolic movement in the 1830s were there *any* Apostles (they refer to this as the "dead period").

This is no small point, since the NAC believes that without an Apostle, there can be no true church of Jesus and hence no possibility of salvation. So for nearly 1800 years of the history of mankind post-Christ, there has been no salvation possible. "However, since they lacked the Apostle ministry, they could not perform the work of salvation" (#191 of *Questions*; 'they' refers to churches that existed after John's death).

A look at the ten creeds of the NAC also bears this out. As we already noted, the first three are simply a restatement of the Apostles' Creed. Articles 4 and 5 deal with the office of Apostle, the next three with the sacraments (in which the apostles also play a prominent role), article 9 with the second coming of Jesus, and the last dealing with submission to secular authorities.

The strong impression one gets from these ten creeds is how important the Chief Apostle and lesser apostles are, and how minimal seems to be the role of Jesus. Put another way, what is striking is what these creeds do not say. For example, they say nothing of the death of Jesus as a vicarious, substitutionary

atonement,¹² and although the Apostles' Creed is a well-loved document of Christianity, it is inadequate for establishing the deity of Jesus. Nothing is said about the authority of God's Word (in fact, nothing is said about the Bible, period), yet much is said about the authority of the office of apostle. For example, from the Creed we learn that:

- All rule and authority in the church come only through the apostles,
- Only they have the power to forgive sins,
- Only they have the power to confirm the gift of the Holy Spirit, and
- Only they have the power to appoint all other church officers.

The other NAC literature bears this out when it discusses the role of Apostle. Consider these statements:

- "Obedience of faith is the subordination of the human will to the will of God, which for the New Apostolic Christian is manifested in the Apostles' doctrine" (#303 of *Questions*).
- "The Apostle is, by the will of God, the deputy of Jesus Christ in His Church, who - filled with the Holy Spirit and the will of Jesus to save mankind - is entitled to reconcile men with God through the power of Jesus and in His name" (#163, see also #164).
- The Lord's congregation, his church, will be "perfected by the activity of the Apostles" (#166).
- Peter is called the "visible head upon earth" of Jesus' church. "The position of Apostle Peter is equal to that of the present Chief Apostle" (#180).
- "The Chief Apostle, as the visible head of the Church, is the highest authority in all matters." He is "the Lord's representative on earth" (#226).
- And from the New Apostolic Creed, item 4: "I believe that the Lord

¹² Article 7 speaks of the "once brought eternally valid sacrifice and the bitter suffering and death of Christ." It is difficult to understand precisely what the NAC believes in this statement, simply because there is nothing stated in the Creed about man's sinfulness and the need for atonement. However, what is clearly stated is that, regardless of what the sacrifice of Christ did, its benefits can only be received through the Chief Apostle. Another striking omission in the Creed is the "how" of salvation, as there is nothing said in the Creed about justification by faith. Of course, one could argue that the office of apostle stands in this position, which only bolsters the impression that the NAC is more about the Chief Apostle than about Jesus Christ.

Jesus rules His Church through living Apostles until His return, and that He has sent and still sends His Apostles with the commission to teach, to forgive sins in His name, and to baptise with water and the Holy Spirit" (#299).

Also, from Langtry's pamphlet come these statements:

- "... there is only One whom we can thank - our great God and His Son, Jesus Christ! Them we see in the flesh in our beloved Chief Apostle, the one who leads us" (p. 16).
- "No one on earth is comparable to the Chief Apostle who alone has the key to save. To him the power, authority and gifts have been granted from God to redeem" (p. 18).
- "The present-day Saviour (speaking about the Chief Apostle) is therefore the firm foundation of our faith. He is the hub of the entire work of salvation, in this world as well as in the beyond, and there is no substitute" (p. 18).
- "The New Apostolic Church is a fellowship of souls, who, fully comprehending their heavenly calling, allow themselves to be led by the Apostles of Christ, because through them alone do they receive the virtues of Christ and therewith the righteousness which is valid before God" (p. 22).¹³

As can be seen, the role of apostle and especially Chief Apostle cannot be over-estimated. He has the power and authority to lead, as the *only* representative of Jesus on earth, and he has the authority to forgive sins and hence save. In short, his word is law.

This makes things all the more interesting when we realize that on any given Sunday, *all* the NAC congregations in the world hear the same message, and that message is prepared by the Chief Apostle. This serves to remove the notion that the Word of God stands as the primary authority of the NAC, and bolsters the impression that the Chief Apostle and he alone embodies all authority in the church.¹⁴

¹³ Langtry has gleaned the above quotations from various NAC materials including sermons and letters from the apostles.

¹⁴ "There is no manuscript, and nothing is read out to the congregation. As preparation for all Divine Services, there is only a brief letter, the so-called "Word of Life" published by the church administration, which contains the text to be read out from the Holy

The NAC is the only church of Jesus Christ on this earth (#216). This makes perfectly good sense when one considers that a true church of Jesus can only exist where there are Apostles, and the NAC is the only one that has the true Apostles.¹⁵

The Sacraments: At the heart of the NAC are the sacraments of the church, for through them salvation is granted by the Apostles. They can be characterized in the following manner:

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|--------------|---|--------------------------|
| Baptism | - | washes away original sin |
| Communion | - | takes away recurrent sin |
| Holy Sealing | - | gives the Holy Spirit |

Baptism is the first sacrament that a person in the NAC receives, as the NAC practices infant baptism. It is called “the essential prerequisite for receiving the Holy Ghost” (#254). Baptism is only valid when ratified by the church (#265), and baptisms in other denominations are not valid (#267).¹⁶

Communion cancels all sins committed after baptism. The church holds communion weekly, and absolution of sins occurs before the partaking of the elements. “The absolution is the announcement of grace, while Holy Communion is the confirmation of the fact that all debts have been cancelled” (#275).¹⁷

Scriptures accompanied by some additional thoughts - the church ministers commissioned to conduct a Divine Service put their trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to provide the words that will be spoken. In the Bible we read that the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, “Take ye no thought what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.” The priests of the New Apostolic Church still rely on this age-old word today” (<http://www.nak.org/text/3-gb.html>).

¹⁵ The “dead period” from the time of the death of John to the present Apostolic ministry also serves to cleverly undercut any authority of the Roman Catholic Church, which by rights should have the apostolic authority, given the logic of the NAC. However, by severing the apostolic succession of previous centuries, and then restarting it again with the founding of the NAC, the NAC puts itself in the place of the RCC.

¹⁶ The NAC also has confirmation, although it is not considered a sacrament. It is normally done after age fourteen, when a baptized member confirms his commitment to God (#296).

¹⁷ “Holy Communion preserves the eternal life of the soul, offering it the security of remaining in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer (cf. John 6:51-58)” (<http://www.nak.org/text/4-gb.html>).

Lastly is the sacrament of *Holy Sealing*. Also called baptism with the Holy Spirit, Holy Sealing is considered the “most important part of rebirth” (#281) and can only be administered by the Chief Apostle or Apostles by the laying on of hands (#289). In this sacrament, a person receives the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

These sacraments form the core of NAC soteriology. A story will help clarify how important the sacraments are. Consider two men, one who had never taken communion, and the other who just did on Sunday. Come Monday morning, both men are killed in a car accident. According to the NAC, the first man’s soul was very dirty because he had never had his sins wiped away through communion. However, the other man’s soul was very clean, since he only had the sins remaining that he had committed between partaking of communion and his death. So what exactly happens to these two men? Their individual situations are dealt with in the following NAC ritual.

The “Services for Departed Souls”: One of the most interesting aspects of the NAC is its view that dead people can still be saved through the intercession of the living, and it may be the chief reason why the NAC has been so well received in Africa. This is done through the “Services for Departed Souls,” held three times per year in every district. In the Service, two members act as “vessels” who then partake of the three sacraments, baptism, communion, and Holy Sealing. A “departed soul” is able to come and participate in these sacraments, thus securing salvation for itself. In the example earlier about the two men killed in a car accident, in both cases the men would need to come to such a Service in order to have their sins cleansed. Even the man who had just had communion the day before would have to come. Also at these meetings it is not uncommon for people to have “visions” where they can actually see the departed souls coming to the Service.

The NAC justifies these beliefs through a number of ways. First, it argues that this is precisely what Jesus did during the time between his death and resurrection. He went into the “realm of the dead” and preached the Gospel there (#143) and therefore, “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” (#145).

¹⁸ “It is the basis for a complete renewal of the inner man” (<http://www.nak.org/text/4-gb.html>).

Another argument comes from Paul's statement about "baptizing for the dead" found in 1 Corinthians 15:29. This is admittedly a difficult verse to understand, but does it warrant an entire doctrine built from it? Further, a favorite example used to support salvation for the dead is found in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In it, the rich man asks for a drop of water on his tongue, signifying baptism, so say the NAC.

In #253 of *Questions* it says this: "From the intimate connections of circumstances of both the dead and the living at all times, we know that we can intercede on their behalf before God (2 Maccabees 12: 39-46 [Apocrypha]; Luke 14: 12-14; cf. Revelation 6: 9-11), so that they too may be saved."¹⁹ This statement serves as an excellent example of the NAC usage of Scripture. Here are the two New Testament passages they use for support:

"Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14: 12-14)

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth, and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed." (Rev. 6: 9-11)

Do any of these verses support the notion that the living can "intercede on [the behalf of the dead] before God?" Much of NAC doctrine is built on this sort of biblical interpretation and usage.

¹⁹ As we will note later, the NAC recognizes fourteen Apocryphal books in its canon of Scripture. However, a more interesting matter to note now is, why does the NAC recognize the 27 New Testament books currently in the canon? As church history records, the final 27 books were not agreed upon until 397 at the Council of Carthage, nearly three centuries after the last Apostle died. In other words, the NAC uncritically adopts the same 27 books that the church chose during the "dead period" when no living apostle was there to give the church life.

A fair criticism of the NAC on this Service is the question: Why only offer it three times per year? If this is truly the way the dead can be saved, why not do it all the time, even constantly? Is God not interested in saving all people? (which is another argument used by the NAC for justification of the Service).

How Is a Person Saved?: “Through the grace of Jesus Christ man can achieve God’s righteousness” (#90). This sounds orthodox, but is it the entire story? *Questions* #140 and #141 address the issue of why Jesus had to die, and again, the answers are very good: Jesus had to die to offer himself as a “fully valid sacrifice.” “He created the means of grace which render a perfect reconciliation between man and God possible.”

But we have also seen how important the Apostle’s role in all of this is. The NAC makes a large distinction between the “law of the letter” and the “law of the Spirit,” and it is the latter that is important. This we are told was the point of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus taught us that “Those, however, who honestly endeavored to achieve the good pleasure of God would be saved” (#122). So where do we find this “law of the Spirit?”

Incredibly, we find it in the teaching of the modern-day Apostles. “We shall readily accept the law of the Spirit of Christ in the doctrine of the Apostles, the messengers in His stead” (#94). So now we have come full circle: Jesus died so that salvation would be made *possible*, then he entrusted this salvation to his Apostles who in turn have the authority to give it to whomever they see fit. When I asked the Bishop how a person is saved, he told me that by leading “a clean life” and following the law of love a person was saved, coupled with participation in the sacraments. Also recall that only the Apostles have the authority to lay on hands and thus confer the Holy Spirit, and of course, a person is not saved until that person has the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, a person is saved in the NAC through a combination of living a good life and partaking of the sacraments of the NAC, both in full submission to the authority of the Chief Apostle. In this way, “man can achieve God’s righteousness.” Also keep in mind that this means that salvation is only possible for the roughly 10 million members of the NAC, whereas the rest of humanity will perish.²⁰

²⁰ We should also note that much is “said” in what is not said in the NAC statements. There is nothing mentioned about salvation as a gift from God apart from man’s works, as Paul so often emphasizes in his epistles. Put another way, the righteousness that the NAC envisions is an infused righteousness (“man can achieve God’s righteousness”) and

View of Scripture: The NAC Bible includes the Old and New Testaments, as well as fourteen of the Apocryphal books. The Bible is God's Word; however, it must be properly interpreted. This can only be done by the "Chief Apostles and the Apostles united with him" (#8, *Questions*).

It is not so much that the NAC does not have a good view of biblical authority, it is instead how they come to the teachings that they profess that is the problem. The hermeneutic of the NAC leadership is shoddy at best. Consider, for example, their use of the phrases "former rain" and "latter rain" from Hosea 6:3 and Joel 2:23, respectively. Instead of taking them in their immediate context, the NAC spiritualizes these terms and labels the revivals in the 1830s the "latter rain."

We have already noted they allegorize the creation account of Genesis, but consider this example. They claim the Parable of the Wedding Feast dealt with Noah (the first servants), Jesus and the Apostles (the second servants in the parable), and the "latter rain" or NAC (the third servants). Students of Scripture know, though, that this is a terribly poor hermeneutic, violating the simple rule, "it cannot mean now what it did not mean then." In other words, that Jesus was teaching first century hearers a parable which talked about a church that would form 1800 years later just does not make sense.

Another example is how the NAC gets to its beliefs concerning salvation for the dead, something we have already discussed above, in its interpretation of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and its misuse of other passages of Scripture.²¹

Further, is Scripture really the ultimate authority for the NAC, or is it the teaching of the Chief Apostle? Consider the early history of the Apostolic

not an imputed or alien righteousness as traditionally understood by Protestantism. Their understanding of the sacrament of communion also bears this out: "By taking it in faith, one assimilates the nature of Jesus Christ and receives new strength. The preceding remission of sins helps the confessing sinner to overcome his faults and weaknesses" (<http://www.nak.org/text/4-gb.html>).

²¹ Even in their understanding of the sacraments, the NAC seems to force Scripture into its preconceived agenda. "Sacraments are holy acts. In the Holy Scriptures, among other things, you will read "And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (cf. 1. John 5:8). In accordance with this sequence, the New Apostolic Church, therefore, knows three sacraments: Holy Sealing, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion" (<http://www.nak.org/text/4-gb.html>).

movement, which was characterized by visions and revelations. There is a real sense that the NAC has worked backwards and, instead of allowing the Scripture to teach them, has gone to the Scripture to look for substantiation for their preconceived beliefs.

Church Organization: The NAC is present in every country but about ten, so they claim. The Chief Apostle has always been German speaking and currently is a Swiss man, Richard Fehr.²² The organization then follows the hierarchy of District Apostle, Apostle, Bishop, District Elder, Rector (the leader of each congregation), and then under him, Evangelist, Shepherd, Priest, and Deacon (see #223 and #224 of *Questions*). These are also called collectively the 'Administration Brothers'. The NAC gives the biblical mandate for these "ministries," but also notes that the ministry of Prophet was canceled in the middle of the twentieth century because it was no longer necessary, providing this cryptic comment: "The ministries which are not mentioned in the Bible became necessary because of the rapid growth of the congregations" (#225). We have to ask, then, is the NAC organization truly biblical?²³

"The Apostles are the immediate helpers of the Chief Apostle, who takes first place in their circle. As bearers of the ministry which administers the Holy Spirit, they form, together with the Chief Apostle, the fellowship which offers, by Christ's commission, salvation and redemption to mankind and conveys the eternal life out of Christ. For this purpose they were chosen, equipped and ordained" (#229). "The Administration Brothers are called to effect [sic] the salvation of mankind" (#241).

Miscellaneous Beliefs: One controversial belief of the NAC is that Jesus was born with inherited sin, like any other human being. This the Bishop told me plainly. This inherited sin, though, was erased when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus is, therefore, the first to be reborn by the Holy Spirit (Bishop: "the first reborn soul on earth since Adam"), and they believe he then lived a sinless life. Langtry also notes that Irving was excommunicated from his church for teaching that Jesus had a sinful nature (p. 47).

²² "Since 1988, the Chief Apostle of the New Apostolic Church has been Richard Fehr. He leads the church from its head offices in Zurich, Switzerland. Richard Fehr is a Swiss national and the seventh Chief Apostle since the foundation of the Church. His position can be compared to the one Peter had 2,000 years ago in the circle of the Apostles" (<http://www.nak.org/text/6-gb.html#1>).

²³ The following website also covers the structure and organization of the NAC: <http://www.nak.org/news/20030125-27-gb.html>.

Tithing is extremely important in the NAC, and although they make it a point in their literature to say that it is entirely voluntary, one gets the sense that it really is not. In fact, the Bishop mentioned that if a person does not tithe everything he has (money, time, etc.) he is not living a proper life and could put his soul in jeopardy. It is no wonder, then, that the NAC is a very rich church, building new churches all with cash and no loans, and is able to pay exorbitant salaries to its top leaders.

The NAC also has a history of false prophecies concerning the Second Coming of Jesus. Langtry reports that dates set for Christ's return include 1835, 1838, 1842, 1845, 1855, 1866, and 1877. One prediction in the middle of the twentieth century, by the then Chief Apostle Bischoff, caused a large rift in the church when that prophecy did not come true either (pp. 11-12). Such errors are all the more dangerous when one considers that the NAC teaches that the Chief Apostle is *the* representative of Christ on earth.²⁴

Is the NAC a Cult?

A key point of contention between traditional Christianity and the NAC must fall along the matter of the office of Apostle. Is the NAC correct in its contention that the office of Apostle as it exists in its church today is the same office that was instituted by Christ in the New Testament? Further, does the New Testament support the notion that this office was to continue even after the New Testament times were completed?

A key consideration in all of this is what happened in the early church when Judas Iscariot was to be replaced as an apostle. The criteria for his replacement is found in Acts 1: 21-22: a person who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry to his ascension into heaven. There is no mention in the rest of the New Testament of apostles ever being appointed. Paul also fit this qualification in a way because he had seen Jesus Christ post-resurrection (1 Cor. 9:1). It should also be noted that in Ephesians 2:20, Paul tells us that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and a foundation implies

²⁴ The NAC holds strongly to the view that its members should obey the temporal authorities (Creed #10), but this has gotten them into some hot water in the latter half of the twentieth century. The NAC was clearly a supporter of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and has also fallen under criticism for its previous support of the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Certainly, churches can make mistakes, but this church claims to be the *only* representative of Jesus Christ on the planet. Such mistakes as these cause us to look with great suspicion at their claims.

something laid down once, upon which something is built. In short, one could rightly criticize the NAC for its view that their modern-day Apostles have the same status and authority as those of the first century.

It is this unbiblical view of the office of Apostle that ultimately yields the authoritarianism found in the NAC. As we have seen, a person cannot have his sins forgiven or receive the Holy Spirit apart from the Apostle. Today, there are roughly 270 NAC Apostles, and the salvation of all of mankind is entrusted to these men, for apart from their work, a person cannot be saved.

Other criticism of the NAC:

1. Their view of the nature of Jesus Christ, particularly as it relates to his deity, is suspect.
2. There exists a “works righteousness” in the NAC and the atoning death of Jesus is compromised with their teaching that believers work out their own righteousness.
3. Their general approach to Scripture and how they formulate doctrine is suspect.
4. Does the New Testament truly teach that a person can only receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of an Apostle? (see Acts 4:31, and the conversion of Cornelius, Acts 10).
5. The notion that for roughly 1800 years God did not allow anybody to be saved is highly questionable.
6. They claim to be the only church of Jesus to the exclusion of all other churches, and this “exclusivism” is a classic characteristic of a cult.
7. Their history of false prophecies concerning the Second Coming of Jesus is disconcerting.

From the above, we can conclude that the NAC is not simply another church or denomination but is in fact a cult. From their view of God and the nature of Christ, to their authoritarian leadership and its ability to distribute salvation, the NAC is a church that should be avoided. It is not proclaiming the Gospel, yet it claims that it is the sole vessel through which salvation from God is given today.

The NAC & Africa

Why has the NAC experienced such strong growth in Africa? Two possible reasons should be considered. The first is the NAC’s commitment to the souls of the dead. One of the classic difficulties facing Christianity in Africa is what to do with the dead. Many syncretistic movements in Africa have attempted to

address this problem by combining elements of Christianity with traditional African beliefs concerning ancestor veneration and mediation. The NAC is appealing to many Africans who are concerned about their dead relatives who died before hearing the Gospel. Involvement with these dead ancestors is a common reality in Africa, and may be one reason why the church has exploded in membership on the continent, as opposed to continents such as North America and Europe where it has only experienced modest success.

The second is authoritarian leadership. John Mbiti's well-known comment that Christianity in Africa is "a mile wide and a quarter-inch deep," when coupled with the realization that biblical education of church leaders and pastors is the priority need for the Church in Africa today, yields a picture of the Church in Africa as immature and biblically needy. People are pouring into the churches and growth is dramatic in all corners of sub-Sahara Africa, yet the paucity of adequately trained pastors and church leaders is appalling. The NAC capitalizes on this general ignorance of Scripture by spoon feeding its form of doctrine to the masses. Church members are not encouraged to think for themselves, let alone church leaders who are expected to be "led by the Spirit" to the exclusion of solid biblical training and education. As has already been noted, being led by the Spirit in NAC-speak really means to submit to the authority and teaching of the Chief Apostle.

Whereas often we find ourselves concentrating on the "classic" cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, neither of these compare to the NAC in terms of membership numbers and influence on the continent. In the next decade, the membership of the NAC will approach ten million Africans. Teaching concerning this cult should play a more prominent role in the education of evangelical church leaders and pastors, and subsequently of evangelical believers continent-wide.

CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR *AJET*

The Editorial Committee for *AJET* (a journal that facilitates theological reflection and research by evangelicals on theological issues throughout the continent of Africa) welcomes articles by evangelical scholars for publication. Such articles will be screened based on the following criteria:

Theology: Since *AJET* publishes theological reflection based on the authority of Scripture articles submitted for publication should reflect an evangelical perspective.

Relevance: Articles should be relevant to the African Christian Church today. Topics may deal with a range of issues, including theology, African church history, practical theology, theological reflection on problems in the church due to traditional African culture or contemporary society, theological and Christian education in the African context and other similar topics.

Scholarship: Articles should reflect serious scholarship based on library or field research. Bibliographic references should preferably be no less than ten. The English composition should be accurate and readable, without the need for extensive editing.

Format: Articles should be typewritten, double-spaced with bibliographic information (of every book used) at the end of the paper. Footnotes or Endnotes should be properly given, following guidelines of scholarly publications.

Biographic Information Requested: Authors should include a brief biographic sketch of their present vocational work, together with the last degree obtained and name of the institution from which the degree was obtained.