

CONTINUING
IN THE THINGS WE HAVE
LEARNED



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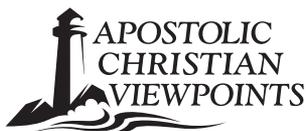
1st Edition, September 2018

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This booklet is part of the Apostolic Christian Viewpoints series, a collection of writings prepared by a committee of the Elder Council of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean).

These booklets are not intended as exhaustive works on their respective subjects. Rather, they are offered as an encouragement to those who currently embrace these views; and to those who do not, a call to consider these topics in the light of scripture ... and the Lord give thee understanding in all things. (2 Tim 2:7).



I. INTRODUCTION

As the Apostle picked up his quill to write his last letter, the Holy Spirit inspired him to prophesy one final time concerning the last days of the earth - a prophecy that lingers even though it was written almost two thousand years ago. Yet in every generation since it was penned, God-fearing men and women have pondered the sobering words contained in what is now called the third chapter of Paul's second epistle to Timothy. Today, no follower of Christ can deny how clearly that passage describes the condition of our world. Thankfully, he not only describes the condition of men's hearts in the last days, but the Apostle was also inspired to instruct the Christian how to live in these perilous times. It is from his last words on record that the theme of this booklet is taken.

Before examining this theme, it is important to consider its context. Only when we have a healthy appreciation for the spiritual nature of the dangers that plague our society will we better understand how valuable and fitting are the instructions of the beloved Paul. Second Timothy chapter three lists many characteristics that will become the "new normal" for people in the days before the Lord returns. Regardless of nationality, age, culture, education, or religion, men and women will be...

...Lovers of their own selves...

Many books have been published and articles written warning of the rise of narcissism¹ in our society. A lead article published in *Time* magazine stated the previous generation was known as the "Me Generation" but the current generation is the "Me Me Me Generation"². Studies by some social scientists have gone further and conclude that we are experiencing an *epidemic* of narcissism. Psychologists are giving careful thought to the repercussions of this reality, referring to this as the *age of entitlement*³. It isn't difficult to

¹ Narcissism (noun) – inordinate fascination with oneself; excessive self-love; vanity. Synonyms include: self-centeredness, egocentrism

² The Me Me Me Generation, Joel Stein, *Time Magazine*, May 20, 2013

³ The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell. Published April 2009 by Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

see how narcissism easily leads to other characteristics listed in this passage: that people will be “covetous”, “boasters”, “unthankful”, “heady”, and “high-minded”. While self-centeredness and its fruits have always been a problem for humanity, the Apostle foresaw that self-love will increase to a point that it will make the last days truly dangerous.

..Ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth...

This characteristic is strikingly obvious in the 21st century. Every area of our world has been impacted by momentous advances in technology, ranging from the medical sciences to manufacturing, and communications to commerce. Related, the increase in knowledge has been matched by an increase in the availability of information so that there is a growing expectation that the average individual should be able to access any data, anytime, anywhere. People are “ever learning” in the sense that information is increasing at an incredible rate and this increase is assumed to be inherently good for mankind. Nevertheless, with all the far-reaching changes brought by these impressive advances, the nations are as far from God as ever. The development of man’s knowledge has not brought him to the knowledge of *the* truth that is found in Jesus.

These are but two of at least two dozen characteristics listed in 2 Timothy 3 that describe the toxic environment for the Christian in the last days. Considering the earnest warning in this passage, it is essential for sincere believers to meditate on the Apostle’s exhortation, ***“But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them^{4”}***.

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:14

II. SHIFTING SANDS

As a fellowship of North American Christian believers, we must contend with powerful trends and movements that are sweeping through Western culture. Although our commitment to the Holy Bible is steadfast, our ability to maintain this commitment and a clear identity as a specific, called-out Christian brotherhood is challenged by these pervasive influences. As already noted, many of the characteristics of the last days are obvious and plain to see. At the same time, other challenges are subtle and, yet, can reshape people's thinking and perceptions. It is crucial that we not allow the changing norms of society to confuse us or obscure how we view and understand the world around us and, most importantly, the unchanging message of God's Word.

One subtle influence is the priority of knowledge, specifically, that which is available via the internet. Searching the web is quickly becoming the primary method of obtaining answers to our questions. The amount of information available is vast and instant.⁵ With this in mind, how should Christians grow in their understanding of God's Word? This question may be answered very differently by this generation when compared with their grandparents. Two generations ago, devout believers would have emphasized a careful reading of the Scriptures and much time spent in prayer to grow in knowledge. Today's generation of believers may advise the same thing, but likely their first step would be to search the Internet. When searching for spiritual understanding, are we more likely to 'Google' than kneel in prayer? Is visiting websites that discuss the Scriptures the same as going to the Scriptures themselves? Is the quality of our devotion to the Lord suffering in part because a couple of quick clicks is all it takes to see what others have to say about the Scriptures instead of opening and reading the Bible, and meditating and praying about what we read? Certainly, there are study aides available online that can help us learn about God's Word if used with discernment, but there is no substitute for going directly to the Scriptures and not relying on man's interpretation of the Scriptures. Devout believers recognize that growing in knowledge of the Word of the Lord is vain if it

⁵ A random search using Google, on the topic of the Civil War, displayed 241,000,000 results in .61 seconds. In less than a second, there is more information made available than one could possibly read in their lifetime.

is not coupled with a closer relationship with the Lord of the Word. We must be wary that our reliance on the Internet does not subtly crowd out our time spent in quiet devotions with the Lord.

Another way in which our technologically driven world indirectly influences us is the need for endless change. Cell phones, laptops, and other personal devices all have operating systems and software programs, each needing to be continually upgraded. It is the way of technology to constantly improve performance and security.

Consequently, that which was purchased just a few years ago needs frequent replacement. Although this causes inconvenience and expense, users of personal technology accept this arrangement as unavoidable. It is a never-ending cycle of continuous enhancements.

Another example of endless change is found with manufacturers, large corporations, and other profitable businesses, who engage in continual efforts to improve efficiency, reduce waste, and add value to their products. They do this to remain competitive and profitable in an ever-changing market place. To accomplish these ideals, many corporations implement what is known as a culture of continuous improvement. In essence, it embodies the idea that what is good enough for today will not be good enough for tomorrow.

Sophisticated and well-planned processes are implemented to ensure the continuous improvement of the entire organization. While the drive for constant improvement is indispensable for both technology and corporations, is it appropriate to apply this management philosophy to the Christian Church? Is there an assumption that the Church must be continuously and deliberately reworked? It is important that we distinguish between a bias toward change simply for the sake of change and spiritual growth. Change that results from growing in grace stems from the Holy Spirit's work within the heart and produces unmistakable fruit: conformity to Christ. This type of change is both beautiful and essential in the Christian life; it is neither artificial nor rooted in man's wisdom.

Just as a desert landscape can be dramatically changed by the effects of the wind, so also our perception of the Christian faith and how it is practiced can be fundamentally altered by the subtle changes of a surrounding world. To avoid becoming disoriented, it is vital that we hold onto that which changes not.

III. HOLDING FAST THE FAITHFUL WORD

In the face of the dangers of these last days, the Apostle Paul exhorted us to continue in (i.e. remain with) the godly truths we have been taught. He emphasized this in both this second epistle to Timothy and in one he wrote to another young elder brother, Titus, by stating we should firmly hold onto the Faithful Word⁶. He foresaw the need for steadfastness to maintain doctrinal clarity. Thus, we sense the meaning contained in his exhortation: hold fast, cling, grip tightly, to the Holy Scriptures. These action words convey a sense of urgency. Do we share this same sense of urgency in our day?

As we have seen, the last days will be filled with many challenges: both those that are obvious and those that are subtle. Generally, we tend to respond to challenges in proportion to the degree of risk we assign to them. Will persecution come with threats of beatings, imprisonment and death? The devout believer is ready to stand up and be counted. He or she is committed to being faithful even unto death. What if the persecution is less extreme, but takes the form of mockery, harassment, and threats of legal action? The follower of Christ needs to remain alert and be aware of his surroundings, keeping his guard up. What if there is no persecution at all, but instead there are opportunities to accumulate material goods, achieve personal success and live in relative comfort? How will God's children respond to these types of circumstances? What if Christian teachings of every type are made available, addressing every facet of life, are easily accessible and provide an unlimited number of interpretations? How does the Apostolic Christian live in this setting? Regardless of where we live, each of these scenarios and variations thereof is realistic in the world of the 21st century. Nevertheless, in each case, we are met with the same word: continue to uphold, to believe, to practice, to teach and preach those things that you received from the Lord.

It is not within the scope of this writing to detail all the many teachings we have received or the many ways of holding fast those faithful words. The purpose of this booklet is to emphasize this

⁶ 2 Timothy 1:13, Titus 1:9

apostolic exhortation, this imperative: that though we live in dangerous times, we must hold fast by continuing in the same teachings we have received from the Word of God. Belief in the inspiration of Scriptures, that God moved holy men by His Holy Spirit to record the very words it contains, has great implication for us. To regard the Bible as our final authority means it has authority over our personal lives and in the life of the Church. More specifically it means we entirely submit ourselves to this authority by bringing *all* into alignment with the teachings of the Holy Scriptures: our thoughts and understandings, our desires and our ambitions, our preferences and biases, even our church customs and programs. We hold the teachings fast when we hold them above all else.

The Apostle's instruction to continue in the things we have learned stands in stark contrast to the mindset of our self-centered society. The world around us questions why our personal choices should matter to anyone. Why should we care if others agree or disagree with us? Why should church standards extend beyond Sunday worship services and into my daily life? Why should doctrines matter if they are not commonly upheld? Why should congregational and denominational fidelity be a concern? It doesn't require too much imagination to picture how a Church filled with these doubts and questions will struggle to maintain a doctrinal identity and to present a united visible witness to the life of Christ.

The opposite of this is also true: A Church filled with believers who are intent on holding onto the things they have learned and been taught will be much better equipped to maintain a doctrinal identity as a specific fellowship of earnest believers who are committed to the faith that was once delivered to the saints⁷.

⁷ Philippians 2:16, Jude 3

IV. A RIGHTEOUS ROOT

While it is relatively easy to appreciate the concept of holding fast to the Scriptures, particularly the teachings of the New Testament, it is especially important to ponder how this theme applies to our beloved fellowship, the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) (ACCN). This is relevant for at least two reasons: First, we are repeatedly warned by the Lord and the Apostles to beware of spiritual deception in the last days. In the passage at hand, 2 Timothy 3, we are instructed to turn away from those who have the appearance of godliness but whose lives indicate they lack the power of godliness. Second, today there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Christian churches and ministries in existence who claim the Bible as their ultimate authority yet their beliefs and practices vary widely, often to the point of being contradictory and irreconcilable. This breeds confusion. For these reasons, it is crucial we understand the doctrinal roots of our fellowship, so that we may continue in the things we have learned.

As a denomination, the ACCN descended from the spiritual labors of Samuel Fröhlich of Switzerland (1803-1857) and the brethren who followed him. Once Samuel had experienced the new birth, the Lord opened his eyes to see the doctrinal errors of the Protestant church to which he belonged. One of his grave concerns was the unscriptural practice of infant baptism. Another was the understanding that the Christian believer remained a sinner. His growing disagreement with such teachings led to his being excommunicated from the Swiss Reformed Church. From that time he began preaching, baptizing and establishing congregations of those who had experienced the new birth and new life in Christ.

Fröhlich was not an Anabaptist⁸. Nevertheless, the history of the movement he began in Switzerland shows that its development was

⁸ The parallels between the historic Apostolic Christian Church and Anabaptism have been the object of much discussion and study. Though not a direct descendent it has nevertheless been viewed as being of the same spiritual root: *“The Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) is historically and theologically rooted in Anabaptism of the sixteenth century Reformation which sought to recapture the faith and life of the New Testament church.”* We Believe – A Statement of Faith of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean), Third Revision, 2013, Preamble

profoundly influenced by Anabaptist thought and doctrine. Many of the positions, understandings and practices of the new fellowship were the same, or very similar, to the Anabaptists. Thus, to understand the doctrinal roots of the ACCN, it is helpful to examine Anabaptism.

The beginning of the Anabaptist movement has been traced to 1525; a few short years after Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 charges against the Roman Catholic Church to the door of the church in Wittenberg, boldly launching the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Church was essentially the only organized Church in Europe at the time, possessing political power and dominating society. The time of the Reformation was, therefore, a time of religious upheaval in Europe affecting the political and social order of society. Men of conviction arose across Europe, loudly protesting (i.e. “Protestants”) against the excesses of the Church of Rome. Men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox ardently strove to reform the Church of the many false teachings and un-Christian practices that had taken root over the centuries.

As notable as their achievements were, there were others at this time who believed the efforts to reform did not go far enough. In their hunger and thirst for the Lord and His Word, they realized that a separate Christian fellowship must be established—one composed only of those who were truly regenerated. The model of the inclusive “universal church”, which had begun with Constantine, was at odds with Scriptures, and so they came to see that there must be a total break from the Roman Catholic Church. This secondary movement was eventually contrasted with the Protestant Reformation with the label of the “Radical Reformation”, because these believers sought to return not to the teachings of the Catholic fathers, but all the way back to the “root” (Latin: *radix*, from where we get the word “radical”) of the teachings of Christ and His apostles. It is the Radical Reformation that gave birth to countless Anabaptist churches that sprang up and spread like wildfire, attracting the ire of both Protestants and Catholics.

The Scriptures teach that the root of the righteous “yieldeth fruit”.⁹ Indeed, history records the legacy of the Anabaptists as one rich in devotion, sanctification, steadfastness, and evangelistic zeal in the face of some of the most intense religious persecution ever endured.

⁹ Proverbs 12:12

V. THINGS WE HAVE LEARNED

Certain fundamental biblical doctrines are commonly taught by professing Christians from all traditions: Teachings such as the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the triune nature of the one eternal God, the deity of Christ, his virgin birth and sinless life, his atoning death on the cross, his resurrection and ascension, and his future return to judge the world. However, there are also biblical doctrines over which key differences exist. Many of these differences have made a substantial impact on how believers understand the teachings of Scriptures and what they believe about God's expectations for their personal lives and the Church. In this section, we highlight some of the doctrinal understandings that are common to both Anabaptist churches and the ACCN, but are distinctive from mainline Protestantism and Evangelicalism¹⁰. These distinctions are not emphasized to cast judgment on others who claim Christ in sincerity. These distinctions are made because they are becoming (i.e., fitting, in accordance with) of sound doctrine; helping us ponder some of the things we have learned and been assured of, so that we might continue in them.

True Conversion

The Lord Jesus' calling to new life included a calling to self-denial and cross-bearing. Related, he emphasized the need for genuine repentance¹¹. These points are basic to the Gospel message. The Apostles carried this message forward and we find they placed a great deal of importance on true conversion¹².

Within the fellowship of the ACCN, this teaching receives continual emphasis by faithful brethren both in sermons as well as in the questions asked of converts prior to baptism. The stress is placed on experiencing a true and thorough conversion, not a quick and easy

¹⁰ These terms are used in a general sense, with Evangelicalism viewed as a trans-denominational movement within Protestant Christianity. These classifications may be helpful for making broad comparisons with the major divisions within Christianity. It should be understood there are many different denominations and Churches, with varying beliefs and positions that align with one or both of these.

¹¹ Matthew 16:24, Matthew 4:17, 9:13, 11:20, Luke 13:3-5, 24:45-48

¹² Acts 26:20, Romans 6, 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1, 1 Peter 1:14-16, 1 John 2:6,

one. Throughout its history, the Apostolic Christian brotherhood has opposed popular but unbiblical practices, from infant baptism to the contemporary evangelistic innovations of repeating a “sinner’s prayer” or practicing child evangelism¹³. Instead, we have insisted that salvation is not a moment in time transaction when either through ritual or in emotion a soul claims Christ and is declared saved. The focus is not on a moment of decision to accept Christ, but on repentance, forsaking sin, and the transformation to a new life. This focus is reflected in the common use of the term “seeking soul” to describe someone who is repenting as well as the careful efforts made to prepare converts for baptism. All of this leads to a general expectation that conversion requires some time, which was intimated by the Lord Jesus himself when he likened salvation to physical birth¹⁴. This emphasis on a true conversion respects the Apostolic teaching that if any man is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature, the old things of his former life have passed away and all things in his life have become new¹⁵.

Conformity to Christ

We are told that the word Christian means to be “Christ-like”. This simple definition has far-reaching implications for the sincere believer. To be like Christ will certainly set one apart from the vast majority of mankind. Identification with Christ is expressed in both what one does and what one does not. This expression defines the follower of Jesus as a living witness to the love and holiness of God; one whose life’s purpose is to reach the lost with the gospel and to build up the Kingdom of Christ. As he is, so are we to be in this world¹⁶. It is crucial that the world we live in be filled with men and women whose lives so resemble the Lord Jesus that their impact is as a light shining in darkness, and as salt sprinkled on food: clearly noticeable and clearly making a difference. There is another aspect to being conformed to Christ that is equally important: by definition, to be like Jesus means to be unlike the world. There are things the true

¹³ Child Evangelism is a movement which focuses on evangelizing children at a young age, for conversion to Christianity.

¹⁴ John 3:3-8

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹⁶ 1 John 4:17

disciple will not do because Christ would not have done them. Non-conformity to the world and separation from its sin is not a comfortable concept, and has often been met with skepticism, suspicion, and even hostility. Yet, both elements have been deliberately emphasized throughout the history of Anabaptism and the ACCN. In varying ways, this has led to the development of godly standards which, when embraced by the community of believers, help to present a vibrant and united testimony of Christ. Sometimes these godly standards have been misunderstood and characterized as a form of legalism; a blind following of a list of do's and don'ts. Sadly, some have been content with merely holding to an outward form of godliness while lacking actual godliness. Nevertheless, both elements, conformity and non-conformity, must be present for the believer and the Church to truly be like Jesus.

Meaningful Brotherhood

Another important facet of the Christian faith, which has been an integral part of both Anabaptism and the ACCN, is that of a close-knit fellowship. It has been the happy experience of many to enjoy a strong sense of connection and closeness within the membership. This closeness is rooted in a shared, common faith and is accompanied by a spirit of brotherly love. It is a treasure of the brotherhood and is expressed in many of our practices and customs: greeting one another with a mutual wish of God's blessings, the sharing of Christian greetings between congregations, practicing the holy kiss, regular song services where the entire congregation sings together, the purposeful use of the biblical titles of 'brother' and 'sister', the exercise of hospitality, and the list goes on.

The richness of such Christian communion cannot be taken for granted nor should it be viewed as merely a type of spiritual bonus related to our position of maintaining relative spiritual separation from other Christian denominations. More profoundly, it is an answer to the high priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus as recorded in John 17, when he prayed that his disciples would be one. The Lord's Apostles similarly emphasized the vital importance for unity in their teachings and practices. Truly, in Christ, the link between doctrinal unity and

spiritual closeness is not coincidental. Each are highly valued and cherished by those belonging to a “like precious” faith¹⁷.

At the same time, it must be recognized that this is a challenging area for both the Anabaptists and the circle of the Apostolic Christian Churches. Over time, there have been internal disagreements that could not be resolved, resulting in congregations splitting and a fracturing of “meaningful brotherhoods”. This unfortunate reality can be viewed in several ways, yet the problem of schisms pervades all of Christianity and is certainly not limited to churches of the Anabaptist tradition. Division due to a lack of brotherly love and forbearance is disastrous to the testimony of Christ, but ecumenism¹⁸ that results in toleration of doctrinal error is equally tragic. In the final analysis, we must remember the exhortation of the Apostle Paul who repeatedly underscored the importance of maintaining sound doctrine. When sound doctrine is taught and practiced by believers who are truly converted and striving to be conformed to Christ, it should always lead to a meaningful brotherhood that is beautiful to behold and a powerful testimony to the world. It is no wonder that the enemy of mankind uses all his force to attack and disrupt fellowships of those who are committed to following Christ. We do well to receive the exhortation of the beloved Apostle to continue in the things we have learned and been assured of, knowing the faith and testimony of those who have taught us the Truth.

This booklet is an introduction to a mini-series addressing our collective need to maintain doctrinal clarity. The focus will be to highlight key doctrinal teachings and understandings which stand in contrast to Reformed Theology. Some of these topics will include God’s sovereignty and man’s will; God’s will for the salvation of all, the role of grace and the need to endure in faith.

¹⁷ 2 Peter 1:1

¹⁸ Ecumenism refers to the movement to promote unity and cooperation between the many denominations in Christianity. The word derives from a Greek word meaning the whole inhabited world, hence ‘one world religion’.