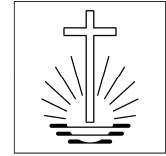


New Apostolic Church International

Chief Apostle / Church President
Zurich / Switzerland, May 13, 2013



Statement concerning the message of Chief Apostle Bischoff

Page 1 of 5

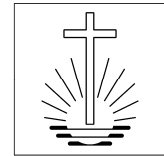
For quite some time now I have been considering the idea of making a statement concerning the 'message' of Chief Apostle Bischoff. In the meantime, his death dates back more than fifty years, which means that a sufficient amount of time has passed in order to allow for a sober analysis. This also appears important to me because I sense insecurity whenever the subject of the 'message' comes up. There are some who advocate that the subject should simply be abandoned, while others call for explanations and clarifications. It is not my intent to cause uncertainty for those who associate personal experiences with the 'message', but rather do my part to deal with the subject of the 'message' in an objective manner. I also see this as a personal duty in view of my kinship with the Bischoff family. The fact that I am only submitting this statement at the end of my term of office is purely due to time constraints. Now that Chief Apostle Helper Schneider has taken over a considerable amount of my work, I can finally take some time to occupy myself with this matter.

Now to the actual issue: the statement of Chief Apostle Bischoff that is described as the 'message' ran as follows:

"The Lord will come again during my lifetime.
I am the last, and there is no one after me."

These two sentences are the core content of the statement announced in the Christmas Day divine service in Giessen in 1951. This divine service is considered to be the actual origin of the proclamation of the 'message'. Chief Apostle Bischoff attributed the 'message' to a divine revelation he had received. He never disclosed exactly when and under what circumstances he had received it. The precise wording of that which was revealed to him is not known either.

To begin with, the 'message' is of a very personal character. It is beyond question that Chief Apostle Bischoff himself believed it. It was cause for him to expect the return of Christ daily and to completely align his life with this event. In this regard his personal attitude was exemplary. It is also quite understandable that the 'message' became an object of proclamation, as the Chief Apostle considered himself responsible for preparing the congregations for the immediate return of the Son of God. The 'message' was an appeal, an urgent admonition to get ready for the day of the Lord.



Statement concerning the message of Chief Apostle Bischoff

Page 2 of 5

In the initial phase of the proclamation of this 'message', Chief Apostle Bischoff nevertheless made it clear that its fulfilment would lie entirely in God's hand. And there is something else that is of note: the Chief Apostle himself expressed at the outset that it was up to each individual whether to believe the 'message' or not.

In the congregations the 'message' provoked a strong response. Many brothers and sisters were willing to take Chief Apostle Bischoff as an example and focus completely on Christ's return. Undoubtedly, the 'message' caused many brothers and sisters to intensify their life of faith – particularly in the initial phase. The circumstances of the time also contributed to the positive acceptance of the 'message: the 'message' coincided with the reconstruction effort after the war. Against the backdrop of the appalling experiences of war many were longing for security. This is quite understandable. This clear orientation towards Christ's return is exemplary even today.

In the years following 1951 the 'message' was given greater and greater priority in the proclamation of the word. From the accounts of contemporary witnesses we can infer that the intensity with which the 'message' was proclaimed differed depending on the region. In general, however, there was an unmistakable tendency to attach increasing importance to the 'message'. Ultimately, it was accorded the same level of priority reserved for the divine promises of Holy Scripture. By then the 'message' was no longer merely a personal revelation that had been announced to the Chief Apostle, but rather assumed the status of a dogma. This dogmatism became very clear in the fact that Chief Apostle Bischoff even sought to associate ordinations and sealings with belief in the 'message'. He expressed this idea in an Apostles' Meeting. Although this did not result in a resolution, the Chief Apostle's wish was still put into practice. The New Apostolic literature of the time also reflects an intensification and exaggeration of this belief in the 'message'.

This intensification constitutes the actual problem. According to our current understanding, Chief Apostle Bischoff should not have allowed the 'message' to be made an essential object of faith. Undeniably however, it is incumbent on the teaching authority of the Chief Apostle "to proclaim such revelations of the Holy Spirit, and to declare them as binding doctrine of the New Apostolic Church" – as stated in the Catechism.



Statement concerning the message of Chief Apostle Bischoff

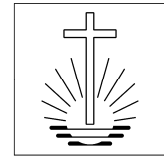
Page 3 of 5

Nevertheless, Holy Scripture must be the starting point and foundation of all doctrinal statements. Thus, it would have been necessary to substantiate the 'message' in a sound and reliable manner on the basis of Holy Scripture. A personal conviction cannot suffice. It must be emphasised, however, that this is the state of our current knowledge. At the time of Chief Apostle Bischoff the doctrinal principles were not yet so clearly established.

Already in those days people began to ask about the biblical basis of the 'message'. Quite frequently people wondered whether the 'message' was perhaps incompatible with the statement of the Son of God in Matthew 24: 36: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." In Chief Apostle Bischoff's view this did not stand in contradiction to the 'message'. He argued that he had only mentioned a time frame, and that he did not know the exact point in time—i.e. the day or the hour—either. Today we endeavour to better understand the statements of Holy Scripture in terms of their context and significance. Thus it is quite conceivable to say that in this passage of Holy Scripture, Jesus wanted to make it clear that the point in time of His return cannot be specified. What is called for is constant readiness. Any form of speculation is not conducive to reaching the goal. According to this line of reasoning, no new 'message' analogous to the 'message' of Chief Apostle Bischoff is to be expected.

Let us come back to the developments of that time. It was unavoidable for polarisation to develop and party formations to emerge. Brothers and sisters who were critical of the 'message' were quickly suspected of having given room to the spirit of doubt. A number of peculiarities have been reported. For example, it is said to have happened that people counted the number of times the officiant mentioned the 'message' in the divine service, and then rated the ministers accordingly. In some regions regrettable hostilities and confrontations came about. Divisions that tore through families and congregations began to emerge. It can only be guessed how many inner battles were associated with all of this. With sadness we recall that some brothers and sisters even found it necessary to leave the Church. Excommunications and schisms were the result.

When Chief Apostle Bischoff passed away in 1960 this was quite understandably a shock for the whole New Apostolic world. The Apostles were confronted with a special responsibility. The danger that many would now turn away from the Church could not be dismissed. Within just a few days explanations had to be found in order to enable the brothers and sisters to



Statement concerning the message of Chief Apostle Bischoff

Page 4 of 5

process what had occurred. The following statement bears special mention in this context: "The Lord has changed His will". This thesis gained lasting influence within the Church.

In support of this statement, examples out of the Old Testament were provided. For example, God had announced the destruction of Nineveh, but later on refrained from doing so, because the inhabitants repented. The Prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah that he would have to die. As a result of his fervent prayers and tears, the Lord added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. In these cases God did not put His original announcement into action. Each of these cases was an act of divine grace, however. By contrast, there is no apparent reason to justify why the promise of the 'message' was not fulfilled. Therefore we must acknowledge that there is no evidence in Holy Scripture to support the thesis that God had changed His will. It is also questionable how this approach could be compatible with our conception of God, because in our view, God is the Omnipotent and Omniscient, who remains true to His promises.

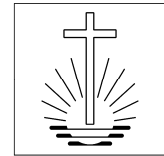
How do we today assess the fact that this 'message' remained unfulfilled? As already indicated above, there are some very different positions on this question. Not least of all, personal experiences also play a special role. I am of the view that different opinions must be accepted as long as they are not declared as generally valid. Those who concluded from the 'message' that they should make the imminent return of Christ the focus of their lives acted wisely. On the other hand, we must also acknowledge that some brothers and sisters suffered under the 'message' and even found themselves with no other alternative but to leave the Church. Today we can only express our deep regret about this.

I would like to emphasise: the New Apostolic Church no longer maintains that the 'message' of Chief Apostle Bischoff was a divine revelation. The question of how to assess the 'message' remains open. Everyone is free to come to their own conclusions on the subject. In addition, the New Apostolic Church will no longer use the justification that the Lord has changed His will.

The expectation of the imminent return of Christ remains a central component of the New Apostolic faith. The time during which the 'message' was proclaimed taught us how intensive this expectation of the Lord can be. This is not intended to trivialise the excesses or problems associated with the 'message', however.

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Statement concerning the message of Chief Apostle Bischoff

Page 5 of 5

It is my sincere desire to ask forgiveness of all those who suffered under the 'message' of Chief Apostle Bischoff, or who even turned away from the Church. I regret the moral dilemma and doubts to which so many were exposed. I would be delighted if this article were to be perceived as a further indication of the desire for reconciliation or even as a step towards reconciliation.



Wilhelm Leber