



# **Position** **of the New Apostolic Church on** **“The hundred and forty-four** **thousand”**



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## 1. Explanation of the number 144,000

The Revelation of John makes reference to the hundred and forty-four thousand. This number embodies a certain symbolism and is more than a mere numeral. Although it represents a mathematically calculated sum (the product of  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ ), it is intended to express a type of symbolism.

For us, the number 12 symbolises God's order. It is an allusion to divine perfection. This can be verified by examples from the Book of Revelation, such as: *"the great city, the holy Jerusalem ... with twelve gates and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: ... Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb"* (Chapter 21: 10–14). Besides the number 12, the number 1,000 is also a factor in the 144,000, which indicates that it is a large but also a finite number.

In chapter 7: 4 we read of John that he heard the number of those *"who were sealed"*: 144,000. Although this is a great multitude, it is still a limited number. These are people who have been chosen according to God's order and typify divine perfection. How do these souls obtain their divine character? By receiving the mark indicating that they are God's property: sealing.

Do these souls originate from the twelve tribes of the children of Israel, at 12,000 each? How literal is the description in verses 5 to 8 of chapter 7? This passage in the Bible does not reflect historical facts. Therefore, it is not a reference to the historical tribes of Israel. Instead we are again confronted with a symbolic interpretation.

This can be derived from the following points:

In chapter 14: 4 we read: *"These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb."* It does not say: *"These were redeemed from among the children of Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel"*. When John wrote these words, the people of the New Covenant, the new royal priesthood of God, already existed (cf. 1 Peter 2: 9,10).

Moreover, let us bear in mind that verses 1 to 3 of Chapter 7 give the impression that 12 tribes of the old Israel are still in existence. From a historical viewpoint, however, this is not accurate. Long before the Apostle John was presented with the Revelation, ten tribes of Israel had already disappeared. After the captivity of the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom under the Assyrians – in 722 B.C. – only the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom were left, namely Judah and Benjamin. While the Levites also resided there, they did not have their own tribal area.

The system behind the enumeration of the 12 tribes described in the Book of Revelation also remains to be clarified. In the Bible we find no other parallel to the order of these names. It should also be noted that it is not the tribe of Dan, but instead Manasseh, that is mentioned. The reasons for this that have been advanced in the past are not very convincing (cf. appendix: Interpretation of Dan; Revelation 7).



The people that were sealed, as mentioned in Revelation 7 and 14, are souls that were chosen from the "spiritual Israel". The 144,000 are souls bearing the proprietary mark of God – they do not belong to any one particular tribe or people.

## 2. The seal, sealing, the "sealing angel", and the sealed

Revelation 7: 1–3 states: *"After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."* This text refers to "servants", i.e. people who will be sealed, but who already enjoy a close relationship with God. What does this mean? How is the "seal" to be interpreted?

The "seal" represents not only a tool, but also the distinctive imprint produced by this tool. Pictures, names, or signs are often engraved in order to identify them as property.

When the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon a believing soul through prayer and laying-on of hands of an apostle (cf. particularly Acts 8: 15,17), we refer to this as "sealing". Through this act, a seal is imprinted as a proprietary mark of God. The image of sealing with the Holy Spirit implies various connotations. In this context we can read the following in 2 Corinthians 1: 21,22: *"Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."* Moreover, we should be mindful of the words recorded in Ephesians 1: 4,5,13: *"Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. ... In Him [Christ] you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."* Another meaningful statement alluding to the objectives of the act of sealing is found in Ephesians 4: 30: *"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."* Through the act of Holy Sealing, man becomes God's possession and is promised a future inheritance of glory, as recorded in verse 14 of the 1st chapter of this epistle: *"who [the Holy Spirit] is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."*

The angel mentioned in Revelation 7: 2,3, who has the seal of the living God, is Christ the Lord. He may be described as the "sealing angel"<sup>1</sup>, so to speak. He is the "Apostle and High Priest of our confession" (cf. Hebrews 3: 1). When He refers to

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<sup>1</sup> The Revelation of John frequently refers to Christ as an angel, e.g. chapter 10: 1,5; 20: 1



Himself in the plural, He is speaking of the Trinity – in a manner similar to that recorded in the account of the creation: *"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'"* (Genesis 1: 26). Here the triune God is active through Christ. He alone has the power to guide the destiny of the world. Christ Himself – though not visible to us – assumes an active role in this endeavour, but for the purpose of carrying out the act of sealing He avails Himself of the apostle ministry (cf. Matthew 10: 40; John 13: 20; 2 Corinthians 3: 8). Revelation does not specify how this act is performed. In any event, the result is that these souls become the chosen generation of the triune God.

The fact that this sealing activity will only take place over a limited period of time follows from the words: *"... till we have sealed..."*

While Revelation 7: 1-8 describes the gathering of the souls that comprise the 144,000, verse 1 of chapter 14 depicts one of the indications that the act of sealing has taken place: *"Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads."* This is an extraordinary sign that they belong to the Father and the Son. The Apostle John now considers the gathering of the chosen generation to be complete. Therefore Revelation 14 deals with completion. It is a reference to the goal that has been attained by those who were redeemed from the earth (cf. Revelation 14: 1; 22: 4). They share in the glory of the Lamb. At the same time, they are among those whose names are written in the "Lamb's Book of Life" (cf. Revelation 21: 27). The 144,000 are bearers of the Holy Spirit, they have the name of the Father and the Son on their forehead and they are followers of Christ.

### **3. What is meant by the term "firstfruits"?**

In the Holy Scriptures the term "firstfruits" appears most frequently in the context of devotion and sacrifice. Applied to human beings or animals, "firstfruits" are the so-called first-born, which were supposed to be sacrificed unto the Lord. This rule also applied to human beings (cf. Exodus 13: 2,12), however, the firstborn son would be "redeemed" by sacrificing an animal instead (cf. Exodus 13: 13,15). For the redemption of mankind, Jesus Christ brought the fully valid sacrifice – i.e. He sacrificed Himself voluntarily and deliberately. With this sacrifice He brought about the redemption of the souls in God's possession: *"These [144,000] were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb"* (Revelation 14: 4).

Already before the time of the Mosaic Law, human beings offered part of the fruits of their labour unto God out of thankfulness, in the awareness that everything produced from the earth is the Lord's own. In particular, they offered the first crops they harvested in the year (cf. Genesis 4: 4). This custom is formalised in the laws of Moses. Every year a sheaf of the firstfruits was dedicated to the Lord at the Feast of the Passover, while at the Feast of Pentecost two loaves of bread were offered as firstfruits.



The complete text of Revelation 14: 4 reads: *"These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb."* (The Greek text also refers to the "firstfruits"). This is suggestive of the harvest law of the Old Covenant (cf. Leviticus 23: 9–22). Chapter 14 of the Book of Revelation also bears reading in this context. Verse 15 refers to the harvest: *"And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud: Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe."* We may regard this as the return of Christ to bring in His "harvest". This harvest is the bridal congregation.

In this context it is of note that there is no "gleaning" (cf. Leviticus 23: 22). Therefore: firstfruits are souls whom the Lord takes home (or "harvests", metaphorically speaking) on His Day.

Apostle Paul describes Christ as the "firstfruits" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15: 20). In this respect there exists a standard for those mentioned in Revelation 14: 5: *"And in their mouth was found no deceit; for they are without fault."* Apostle James also associates the firstfruits with Jesus Christ when he writes: *"Of His [the Father's] own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits, of His creatures"* (James 1: 18).

From all this it follows that those who will be accepted on the day of Christ's coming are firstfruits. The souls who obtained the childhood in God in yonder world will also be part of this group.

The firstfruits are also described as overcomers. By virtue of their faith in Christ they have been given the victory (cf. 1 Corinthians 15: 57).

#### **4. Who belongs to the forty-four thousand?**

The prerequisites for being numbered among the 144,000 on the day of the Lord include having been chosen and redeemed (cf. Ephesians 1: 4–7; Revelation 14: 4), having been sealed (cf. 2 Corinthians 1: 22; Ephesians 1: 13,14; Revelation 7: 4) and having followed Christ the Lamb (cf. 1 Peter 2: 21–23; Revelation 14: 4).

According to 1 Corinthians 15: 50-53 and 1 Thessalonians 4: 16,17, the 144,000 who will enter into eternal fellowship with the Lord on the day of His coming will consist of the souls then living here on earth that have become righteous and worthy, as well as the departed in Christ. According to our comprehension, this group will also include the dead who have obtained childhood in God in the divine services for the departed. Therefore, all those who bear the name of God the Father and the Lamb on their foreheads will be part of this number. However, they must have been found worthy.

Revelation 14: 3 states: *"They [the 144,000] sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that*



*song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth."*

This new song is clearly a song of praise and thanks. The close association with Revelation 5: 8-10 is striking in that it also alludes to the elders mentioned in Revelation 14: 3. These twenty-four elders are closest to God and the Lamb and participate in the divine reign. The number 24 (two times twelve) symbolises the fullness of the ministry that mediates reconciliation in both the old and new covenants. These elders worship God and fall down before Him (cf. Chapter 19: 4), they sing the new song (cf. Chapter 5: 9), and together with the four living creatures they teach the 144,000 to sing the new song.

The wording of the new song is devoted to Christ, the Lamb. According to Revelation 5: 9,10 its text reads: *"You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."*

We assume that the faithful confessors of the old covenant also belong to the multitude of the 144,000. At any rate, this is how Matthew 8: 11 might be understood: *"And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven"* (cf. also Luke 13: 28,29). Of course this would not only include Noah and Moses, but also all those who lived in accordance with their faith (cf. Hebrews 11). In this context we may also refer to Romans 11 and Ephesians 2: 13-18. Apostle Paul attaches great value to the common identity of the peoples of the old and new covenants.

It is beyond our knowledge as to how the faithful confessors of the old covenant would have been sealed. We cannot conclusively assume that they required the rebirth or that they were sealed during divine services for the departed.

## **5. The future of the hundred and forty-four thousand**

Let us once more examine verse 1 of chapter 14: *"Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads."* In this context "Mount Zion" does not represent a specific place here on earth. Rather, this image depicts the place of His glory. And the firstfruits, the overcomers, are permitted to share this glorious abode with Christ Jesus.

The following additional events are also promised to this group, which will be changed and caught up to eternal glory:

- They will take part in the marriage of the Lamb (Revelation 19: 6-9) and will therefore escape the great tribulation that is to come over the whole world (cf. Luke 21: 36; cf. also Revelation 3: 10).



- They will be those who are with the Lord when He returns to the earth after the marriage (cf. Revelation 17: 14; 19: 14).
- Judgement<sup>2</sup> is committed to them in connection with the establishment of the kingdom of peace. They shall further be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (Revelation 20: 4,6).
- Ultimately, they will be the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven<sup>3</sup>. Their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (cf. Revelation 21: 27).

In terms of their future, we equate the multitude of the 144,000 with the "bride of Christ" (cf. Revelation 19: 6,7). Whether additional unsealed souls will also be counted to the bride of the Lord by virtue of an extraordinary act of grace is left to God's sovereignty.

## 6. Conclusion

The 144,000 are composed of souls that have been chosen by God and found worthy to be accepted by Christ at His appearing, because they remained faithful and have overcome. At the Lord's coming, they will be caught up and be changed. As firstfruits they will experience the great event of transfiguration and will rejoice in the fellowship with the Lord as His bride.

Only the Lord knows the number of souls that will be counted to this multitude.

## 7. Appendix

Some statements in this elaboration will not coincide with the understanding that one or the other may have had on this topic before now. A number of these points were previously interpreted differently in our doctrinal tradition. Here we will explain some of these matters in more detail.

### 7.1 Symbolic or actual number?

In the course of our Church's history the view of whether the number of 144,000 constitutes a symbolic or actual number has changed. In addition, it was not always clear whether this number only includes souls that are still in the flesh at Christ's return or

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<sup>2</sup> This judgement does not refer to the Last Judgement, which will be conducted under the sole authority of God. The bridal congregation that is taken home will have the opportunity to share in the reign of Christ, whereby the words of Jesus in Luke 19: 17,19 and Revelation 2: 26,27 will be fulfilled.

<sup>3</sup> From the accounts in Revelation 21: 24–27 we can conclude that there will also be different "abodes" in the new creation, namely within the city and outside of it. This issue will be explored later on.





whether it should also include the souls who have in faith preceded us into the beyond.

In this context, the chief apostle already mentioned in 1991 that "the 144,000 do not represent a mathematically calculated number but rather a symbolic one. Only the Lord knows the number of these souls" ("Our Family" 4/1992, page 9).

## 7.2 Interpretation of Dan; Revelation 7

It is of note that the list of tribes in Revelation 7: 4-8 deviates from that contained in the Old Testament (cf. Genesis 49 and other passages). The list in Revelation presents a different sequence. Above all, it does not include Dan, although verse 4 expressly states: "... of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed." Are we to attach special significance to this? Here and there this was interpreted in our Church as follows: the judges originating from the tribe of Dan had no access to Mount Zion and would thus be excluded from the 144,000.

This statement is not supported in the Bible. When Jacob blessed his sons he did mention that the judges would come from the tribe of Dan. However, of the thirteen judges mentioned by name in the Bible, only one came from the tribe of Dan, namely Samson. Moreover, such an interpretation of the linguistic root of the name does not account for the function of the judges as supreme leaders of the people.

Another interpretation was based on an etymological argument (i.e. on the meaning of the word). The translation of the name "Dan" is "to judge" – and judges should have no place among the 144,000. This interpretation is not convincing since none of the other names are interpreted on an etymological basis. Besides, we can read in the encyclopaedia that the word Dan – from the Hebrew 'dan' – is merely derived from 'dāyn', which means to judge. Moreover, the biblical report on the birth of this son of Jacob rules out any negative assessment of his name (cf. Genesis 30: 6).

Besides all this, it is worth mentioning that the early Church father Irenaeus (c. ad 202) concluded from Jeremiah 8: 16 that the antichrist would emerge from the tribe of Dan, for which reason his name was excluded from the list in Revelation 7. Other theologians argue that Dan was a tribe of idolaters (cf. Judges 17; 18).

None of these arguments are very convincing. The matter must remain open, as it is beyond the scope of this treatise, however this does not justify adherence to previous interpretations.

## 7.3 The "sealing angel"

In some previous New Apostolic literature, the "sealing angel" was understood to be the whole of the apostolate. This treatise has endeavoured to demonstrate that the corresponding statement could only be referring to Jesus Christ. Accordingly, we should work with the current spiritual understanding in future.



#### **7.4 No child of God has power over the angels**

Revelation 7: 2 reports of an angel with a seal, who has power over the four angels that have been given power to harm the earth. He is able to command them. This image in itself is enough to dismiss the previous tradition that either the apostles (i.e. the totality of the apostolate), or even exclusively the chief apostle, would constitute the angel mentioned in Revelation 7: 2. Therefore we must interpret Christ as being the “sealing angel”.

#### **7.5 Firstfruits**

In common linguistic usage, firstfruits are usually equated with the "best", and this view has at times also been advanced in our Church. It was thought that this conception was substantiated by the portrayal of the 144,000 in Revelation 14: 3-5.

Nevertheless, such a systematic classification is not warranted here. The overall context does not allow us to interpret the “firstfruits” as having prominence among those who will be accepted on the Day of the Lord. When interpreting a certain term, it is wise to look into the meaning and significance that biblical statements accord this term. This is exactly what led to the understanding presented here with respect to the term "firstfruits".

By no means should we conclude from all this that there are no requirements at all for taking part in the marriage of the Lamb. The Bible explicitly mentions the particular characteristics of the firstfruits. This is what God’s own should strive to achieve. It is our belief that at His appearing the Lord will add whatever perfection each individual may lack despite all his or her endeavours.

#### **7.6 The uncountable multitude (Revelation 7: 9)**

Only the 144,000 are seen on Mount Zion. If we equate the 144,000 with the bride of Christ, then we must conclude that only this group will be able to participate in the marriage of the Lamb, which would not allow for the participation of the countless multitude as well. The latter are rather to be equated with the “rest of her offspring” (Revelation 12: 17), and the martyrs who will resurrect (cf. Revelation 20: 4).

#### **7.7 The ninth article of the New Apostolic Creed**

Even according to the new paradigm of the first resurrection, the ninth article of our faith remains unchanged. There it states: “After the conclusion of the kingdom of peace, He [Christ] will hold the last judgement when all souls who did not take part in the first resurrection shall receive their part according to their conduct, be it good or evil.”

Zurich, January 2005