



The Use made of the Great Testimony in the New Apostolic Church

In the final article of our series on the Great Testimony, we look at the use the New Apostolic Church made of the document.¹ Special attention is given to a heavily edited reprint of a German translation which was published by Friedrich Bischoff, the Church's publishing house, in 1932. In the concluding paragraphs we state our position regarding the reproach that the Great Testimony was faked by the New Apostolic Church.²

In 1912 the book *Alte und Neue Wege (Old Ways and New)* appeared, commissioned by the college of apostles and written by Eberhard Emil Schmidt, a teacher trained at a teachers' training college. It contained an account of the history of the New Apostolic Church as seen from inside the church. There we read that Apostle Woodhouse and the other British apostles, in rejecting a continuation of the apostolic office by newly-called apostles, had acted against the doctrine laid down in the Testimony.³ In this context Schmidt quotes a letter written by Apostle Schwartz on 29 April 1891 in which Schwartz appeals to the Testimony to prove that it was Apostle Woodhouse who had acted against the original teachings of the apostles, whereas he himself had acted according to the doctrine originally advocated by them.⁴

The "Testimony of the Apostles" blurs differences between the doctrine of the Catholic Apostolic and the New Apostolic Church

We turn our attention to a book published by the church publishers in 1932 for sale to members. Its title can be translated as *The Testimony of the Apostles to the spiritual and secular heads of Christendom*. It was based on a translation of the Great Testimony by Rossteuscher and borrowed its title from the third edition of that translation.⁵ In its preface it

¹ Once again, the authors would like to thank Dr. Tim Grass of Horsham, West Sussex, for his help in checking the English version of this article for linguistic and stylistic accuracy.

² Cf. Hans Diether Reimer, „Dokumentenfälschung?“, *Materialdienst der EZW* 9 (1990), pp. 261-263. Reimer enumerates and classifies divergences between an edition of the Great Testimony made available to the EZW (a Lutheran institution for observing other denominations) and the 1932 edition. He concludes that the 1932 edition can legitimately be called a forgery. He points out that the "manipulation" of 1932 was a thing of the past and that it was quite unlikely that "the present leaders of the New Apostolic Church would act in the same manner". In his final words he argues that the use made of the Testimony refers to the fundamental problem that the New Apostolic Church "today consciously defines itself as a continuation of the Catholic Apostolic Church ... and holds the British apostles in high esteem while differing from it in essential doctrines". It would have to "work out" an identity "which clearly defines how both denominations are related". At various times there have been references to Reimer's article on the internet.

³ Salus [pen name of Eberhard Emil Schmidt], *Alte und Neue Wege*, Leipzig ¹1912, pp. 263-265, (²1913, pp. 266 f.)

⁴ Apostle Fritz Krebs had this letter printed separately (no place, no date, unpaginated). The reference to the Testimony is on the 2nd page. In the reprint in *Alte und Neue Wege*, Leipzig ¹1912 the reference is on p. 274 (²1913, p. 271). Later accounts do not really alter this view. Cf. Vgl. *History of the Kingdom of God*, vol. 1, Frankfurt/Main [1970], p. 187 and Alfred Krempf, Bodo Iloff, "The restoration of the Apostle ministry", in: *Neue Apostelgeschichte – New Acts of the Apostles*, Frankfurt/Main 1985, pp. 119f.

⁵ Regarding Rossteuscher's translation cf. Walter Drave and Manfred Henke, "Der Umgang mit dem Großen Testimonium in der Katholisch-apostolischen Kirche", *Unsere Familie* 22/2006 (20 November 2006), p. 39; annotated English translation "Changing Uses made of the Great Testimony in the



is stated that it was intended to make “the most valuable parts” of the Testimony available to members of the church. The reader is warned to remember “that those apostles described the state of affairs in church and state according to the level of insight reached at that time. The increased light received since then helps us to see some things differently today.”⁶ In spite of this hint that readers should be prepared to find differences in doctrine between both churches, those differences are blurred by a number of textual changes.

“Church” in general and “Church” under apostles

In the course of the twentieth century a wider concept of the church, which had originally existed in the New Apostolic Church, was being replaced by a narrower one. Apostle Schwartz in his *Buch für unsere Zeit (Book for Our Time)*⁷ had implicitly accepted the doctrine of a continuing existence of the church as a foundation of his portrayal of the history of the church through the ages. In the “Textbook for Religious Instruction”, which was in use in the New Apostolic Church between 1916 and 1938, the concept of the church became somewhat confused. On the one hand we find the statement that “the work of the apostles did not perish” when the first apostles died and it is also taken for granted that God had interfered in post-apostolic times so that “the work of his Son and Holy Spirit on earth did not take an altogether wrong course”. However, the authors failed to find a terminology which allowed them to distinguish between the Holy Spirit as a divine power transmitted in the sacrament of Holy Sealing and the universal Holy Spirit as a person of the triune God, who is active at all times. Instead, they distinguished between the Holy Spirit given to men by the mediation of apostles and the activity of “good spirits emanating from God” who, they said, had been active when there had been no apostles. As a consequence, a “church” without apostles appeared impossible.⁸

Apparently, the District Apostle Bischoff, who was to become Chief Apostle later, was not happy with this restricted view of what the church was. As a district apostle he had sent an article to his ministers which defined the bridal church gathered under apostles as the gathering of the firstfruits within a broadly defined Christian church.⁹ Soon after, we do not find any statements on the concept of the church in New Apostolic publications. Instead, we find admonitions not to comment on other denominations and their ministers.¹⁰

In 1932, when *The Testimony of the Apostles* was prepared for publication, the original document was heavily edited. The changes aim at defining the New Apostolic Church as the sole “church of Christ”. In the first place, all those passages are left out in which the history of the church in post-apostolic times was discussed (paragraphs 74-97) or in which denominations outside a church under apostles were criticized (as, for instance, in paragraphs 11, 52 and 56). In addition, sentences or parts of sentences are left out in which there were state-

Catholic Apostolic Church” published on this website on 24-11-2006, p. 9, summing up findings of the annotated German article published simultaneously.

⁶ *Das Zeugnis der Apostel an die geistlichen und weltlichen Häupter der Christenheit*, Frankfurt/Main 1932, p. [4]. On this website, the preface is published (in German) as a part of a synopsis of the 1932 edition and the original version together with this article. In some details our synopsis differs from a synopsis published earlier by Peter Sgotzai.

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Schwarz [Schwartz], *Das Buch für unsere Zeit. Die Offenbarung St. Johannis für die Gemeinde erklärt*, 2 vols. in one, Gadderbaum n.d., vol. 1, pp. 25, 32-34 and *passim*. [The Dutch edition was published in Amsterdam in 1872.]

⁸ *Lehrbuch für den Religionsunterricht der Kinder und Konfirmanden in der Neuapostolischen Gemeinde*, Verlag Friedrich Bischoff, Frankfurt a.M., 1933, p. 85, questions 476 and 481.

⁹ [Cirkularbrief, unnumbered], dated 15 December 1918.

¹⁰ Cf. some fundamental teachings in a series called “Questions and Answers” in *Der Leitstern* (title of the “Amtsblatt” [Word of Life] in 1929), vol. 9 (1929), p. 16.



ments about a continuation of the church in post-apostolic times, as, for instance, the belief that God “never forsaketh His Church” (paragraph 6) or the statement: “He [God] could provide, and He hath provided, that His Church should never fail” (paragraph 63).¹¹

Water Baptism and the dispensing of the Spirit

For the Catholic Apostolic conception of “Church” in a wider sense it is important to keep in mind their doctrine that it is in water baptism that regeneration is wrought by the Spirit and consequently that the baptized are the children of God as laid down in the Great Testimony (paragraphs 25, 65). When Apostle Cardale commented on this, he defined the sealing as the confirmation of what had already been received in water baptism.¹²

This interpretation of the rite of sealing was critically examined in a letter addressed to Apostle Woodhouse by the (New Apostolic) apostles Menkhoff, Krebs and Niemeyer in 1886. Against an interpretation holding the necessity of confirming what had been received in baptism they argued that history showed that the martyrs of post-apostolic times, who, by definition, had not been sealed through apostles (or, as Catholic Apostolics would have it, “confirmed in their faith through sealing), had been so firm in their faith that they had confirmed “their part in the army of Christ through a baptism of blood”. The three apostles define their own position by arguing that a person through sealing receives “the Holy Spirit as the earnest of future glory”. The sealed ones “make up the body of Christ, the followers of the Lord, the Bride of the Lamb”.¹³

In addition to this narrow concept of what the church is, District Apostle Bischoff in 1920 also used a wider concept by distinguishing Christians who received bliss through their faith and their baptism as members of a more broadly defined church and others who were called to become glorious as firstfruits of the baptized by their sealing.¹⁴

In 1931 an article written by Friedrich Linde in the German church periodical “*Wächterstimme*” propagated the doctrine that regeneration or re-birth is brought about by receiving water baptism and the sealing.¹⁵ This helps us to understand changes made in the text of the Great Testimony in the edition published in 1932. Twice the 1932 edition has “baptism with water and the Spirit” where it only says “baptism” in the original. In the first case (paragraph 1) the church of Christ is not any longer defined as comprising all the baptized but only those

¹¹ These changes are not always consistent. In 1932 a statement remained, saying “His Church shall never fail - it is the body of His Son”. Originally, this refers to the Christian Church in general, and it is to this church that the following demand, still extant in 1932, referred to: “... if at any time it have deviated from its original constitution, if the instrumentality ordained of God be in any of its parts deficient, that deviation must be overruled and corrected, and that which has become defective must be restored.” (paragraph 29) We can assume that the editors did not mean to criticize a deviation of the New Apostolic Church from God’s ordinances.

¹² Cf. Walter Drave und Manfred Henke, “Der Umgang mit dem Großen Testimonium in der Katholisch-apostolischen Kirche“, *Unsere Familie* 22/2006 (20 November 2006), pp. 38 f.; cf. the annotated English translation published on this website on 24 November 2006: “Changing Uses made of the Great testimony in the Catholic Apostolic Church”, p. 7.

¹³ “Schreiben der Apostel Menkhoff, Krebs und Niemeyer – vermutlich im Juli 1886 verfaßt – an den letzten noch lebenden englischen Apostel Woodhouse um Wiedervereinigung der alten und neuen Ordnung“, *100 Jahre Neuapostolische Kirche 1863-1963*, Frankfurt/Main 1963, p. 379.

¹⁴ Cirkularbrief No. 9, dated 14-2-1919, 2nd and 3rd pages.

¹⁵ *Wächterstimme aus Zion* of 15. September 1931, pp. 137-143 und 1 October 1931, pp. 145-150. A more elaborate version appeared as a brochure with Linde’s name, entitled *Biblische und neuapostolische Versiegelung (Biblical and New Apostolic Sealing)*, no place, no date. This brochure was written in answer to a brochure by Roeckle, *Biblische und neuapostolische Versiegelung*, n.p. 1929. For information on Roeckle, founder of the so-called Philadelphia movement, cf. Kurt Hutten, *Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten*, Stuttgart, ¹⁰1966, pp. 218-234.



who have received “the baptism with water and the Spirit”, i.e. water baptism and the sealing. In the second instance we no longer read, as in the original, that the life “which God has given us in His Son” is transmitted in “the sacrament of baptism”; instead, we read that for this “the sacraments of baptism (with water and with the Spirit)” have been instituted (paragraph 24). Another part of the text in which the laying on of hands is described as the “sealing and confirming the saints, and imparting the gifts of the Holy Ghost as the Spirit willeth” (paragraph 37) was left out. Where it had said that the baptized “have received the life of God” and become “children of God” (paragraph 43) we read in the 1932 edition that “the anointed” – which meant those sealed with the Holy Spirit – have received this life and become children of God.

Another change is very instructive. In the original we read that baptism “is the washing of regeneration, whereby God of His great mercy saveth us (Titus, iii. 5.); for we who were dead in trespasses and sins, are therein born again of the Holy Ghost ...; the sons of God” and become “verily and indeed members of the risen Lord Jesus Christ” (paragraph 25). This wording agrees with that version of the sixth article of the New Apostolic creed which was officially sanctioned in 1932. Consequently, the text of the Testimony should have been beyond criticism. Indeed, the text was not actually changed, but an explanation was added in brackets saying that the baptized become children of God “through the anointing with the Holy Spirit” which effectually precluded the interpretation that they became so by water baptism (paragraph 25).

The apostle ministry and other ministries in the church

The statements concerning the commission the apostles received were largely preserved in 1932, but some details were changed. One example can illustrate this: To take account of the New Apostolic view of the chief apostle ministry apostles were not called “supreme rulers” of the church, but simply “rulers” of the church under Christ (paragraph 37).

Any statements referring to the four-fold ministry were left out. A sentence was added to paragraph 37 that is opposed to the Catholic Apostolic view that Holy Scripture lays down an order of ministry that is remains valid irrespective of historical circumstances: “All further ministries in the church of Christ were to be called and ordained by these apostles according to the needs of the time, as is also shown by the way the apostles of the primitive church acted.” Thus readers get the impression that the Testimony contains an apologia for a further development of ministries according to the needs of the times as practised in the New Apostolic Church.

Eschatology

The eschatological statements contained in the Testimony were left unchanged. The most likely reason for this seems to be that any New Apostolic teachings on this subject were left without distinct contours until the publication of the book *Die Vollendung des Heilsplanes Gottes nach den Worten Jesu (The Completion of God's Plan of Salvation according to the Words of Jesus)* in 1935.¹⁶

The duty of obedience towards magistrates

Many doctrines contained in the Great Testimony only become intelligible against the background of a doctrine maintaining the divine right of kings. Any statements of that kind were deleted in the 1932 edition (paragraphs 19, 91, 92). Thus the conception of the relationship of Christians towards the state could not collide with the democratic German constitution of

¹⁶ J. G. Bischoff, Hrsg., *Die Vollendung des Heilsplanes Gottes nach den Worten Jesu*, Frankfurt/Main 1935.



1919. Those paragraphs remained in which a biblically based doctrine of a Christian's duty of obedience towards the powers that be was taught (paragraphs 70, 71). A right or even a duty of resistance towards magistrates whose orders are against the law of God was not in the original, and it was not added in the 1932 edition.

Editing the Testimony in a time of re-considering doctrinal statements

Towards the end of 1918, when he was still the district apostle for the South German district, J.G. Bischoff, who later became chief apostle, started issuing so-called "circular letters" ("Cirkularbriefe") for the ministers there. In 1921, when he was assistant chief apostle, he edited the first volume of what was to become a regular circular for New Apostolic ministers in all parts of Germany and many parts of the world. That first year's volume was entitled "Be faithful unto death". At first it was subtitled "Half-monthly paper for the office bearers of the New Apostolic congregations in South West Germany". From January 1922 the later circulars appeared "according to the dear apostles' wish" as a "Half-monthly paper for the priests and rectors of the New Apostolic congregations". When J.G. Bischoff became chief apostle his concern about New Apostolic literature became even more evident. In 1935 there appeared (in German) *The Ministries and Sacraments of the New Apostolic Church*¹⁷ and *The Completion of God's Plan of Salvation according to the words of Jesus*. In them there are passages in which New Apostolic doctrine takes an increasingly independent line from Catholic Apostolic teachings.¹⁸

"To ensure that there is no confusion in the life of faith of our ministers and members"

At present we only know one document that informs us about the production of the 1932 edition of *The Testimony of the Apostles*. It is part of the correspondence between Chief Apostle Bischoff and District Apostle Schlaphoff (South Africa).¹⁹ In a letter dated 31 January 1933 Apostle Schlaphoff expresses his thanks for "the five copies of 'The Testimony of the Apostles' as a present from you". He reports that he is contemplating having Catholic Apostolic books translated from German into English. In reply Chief Apostle Bischoff writes on 22 February:

I own the book 'The Rebuilding of the Church of Christ'. If you want to have the book translated you must be very careful since the contents does not agree with today's circumstances in many respects. From comparing the book 'The Testimony of the Apostles', which I sent you, with what Dr. Rossteuscher wrote, you will see that I have left out much of what was written at his time. My main concern was to make the purely spiritual parts available for our dear brothers and sisters. Please be very careful in translating to ensure that there is no confusion in the life of faith of our ministers and members.

So Chief Apostle Bischoff suggests to Apostle Schlaphoff that he, too, should, if necessary, change Catholic Apostolic texts in such a way that "there is no confusion in the life of faith of

¹⁷ Apostelkollegium der Neuapostolischen Kirche, Hrsg., *Die Ämter und Sakramente der Neuapostolischen Kirche*, Frankfurt/Main 1935.

¹⁸ When this article was in print for *Unsere Familie* 24/2006, the authors became aware that we have to qualify this statement. The book *Die Vollendung des Heilsplanes Gottes nach den Worten Jesu* (*The Completion of God's Plan of Salvation according to the Words of Jesus*) adapts in essential parts a Catholic Apostolic publication, and if it can be said to take an increasingly independent line, this can only mean that statements found in the original were changed. The book is based on William R. Caird, Johann E. G. Lutz, *Christi Worte über die Vollendung der Wege Gottes mit seiner Kirche, dem Volke Israel und der ganzen Menschheit und Schöpfung*, Augsburg 1879.

¹⁹ This correspondence of the years preceding World War II is deposited in the archives of the New Apostolic Church International, Zurich, Switzerland.



our ministers and members.” This shows Chief Apostle Bischoff’s pastoral concern. He expects confusion if it is left to individual members of the church to distinguish between New Apostolic doctrine as it is taught at the time of publication from the apostles’ doctrine of former times. He never seems to worry about a philologically correct treatment of texts.

A falsified text – but was there an intent to deceive?

From today’s perspective there is no need to deny that the text of the Great Testimony was corrupted by the changes made in 1932. However, the New Apostolic Church has also been charged with forging the Testimony. In this context, we believe, it is necessary carefully to define what is meant when we speak of forging a text. Some linguistic distinctions we made in the German article seem impossible to render in English.²⁰ By German law a forger aims at getting an advantage for himself by deceiving another person who, as a consequence, suffers harm. We restrict ourselves to discussing Chief Apostle Bischoff’s concern in publishing the 1932 edition: Did he mean to harm others by deceiving them?²¹

The book was addressed to New Apostolic Christians. It can be argued with good reasons that they were deceived concerning the contents of the Testimony. One ought, however, also ask if it was intended to harm them by its publication. First of all, for most of them it was the first opportunity to read the text of the Testimony. If they formed an incorrect impression of its contents, one may, from today’s point of view, consider it harmful. This, however, is not what the chief apostle intended. According to the letter of 22 February 1933 those who bought the 1932 publication were to receive something valuable, i.e. “the purely spiritual parts” which Chief Apostle Bischoff had discovered when reading the Testimony. As we see it, the paragraph we quoted from the letter to Apostle Schlaphoff tells us that Chief Apostle Bischoff wanted to pass on more profound theological insights which he had received from reading the Testimony.

²⁰ In the German version of the article we distinguished between “Verfälschung” and “Fälschung”. It seems impossible to find exact English equivalents of those terms.

²¹ The authors would like to thank District Apostle Dr. jur. Karlheinz Schumacher of Hamburg, Germany, for a legal opinion on the case and a definition of the German terms mentioned in the preceding footnote.