

dangers of fraternization



a review of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean)
position of not mingling with other churches



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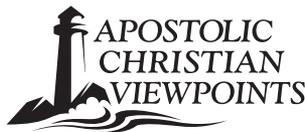
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This booklet is part of the Apostolic Christian Viewpoints series, a collection of writings prepared by a committee of the Elder Council of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean).

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).



Introduction

Within the brotherhood of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) (ACCN), the term “fraternization” was coined to refer to associating or mingling with those of other denominations. In 1975, the Apostolic Christian Publishing Company printed a pamphlet titled, *Fraternization – Ecumenism in its Infancy*. The author defined fraternization as follows: “the working together by association or formal organization of persons, for a common purpose, interest, or pleasure, in a fraternal or brotherly manner.”¹ As suggested by the title, the concern was that such mingling leads to tolerance, which leads to compromise, which in turn leads to union with error. It can be shown that this concern was present among our brethren dating back to the formation of our Church in Europe in the 1830s.

This concern continues to the present day. The expectation that we remain separate from other churches is routinely mentioned during the proving of baptismal candidates. It has often been discussed by church leadership. Yet, despite the attention devoted this subject, some struggle with questions regarding its application, relevance and, perhaps most fundamentally, its biblical basis. This article attempts to highlight factors that should be taken into account when discussing these questions.

For clarity, we note the term “fraternize” has been used within the ACCN to refer to mingling with churches from outside the circle of Apostolic Christian Churches. This term has generally included the attending of worship services and special events, as well as the working together and formation of alliances with other denominations or related organizations.

1. Changing Times

It is often noted that our European forbearers, who implemented this church policy, lived in a much different time and culture. Their typical village experience is believed to have included one or two churches other than our own. Because at least one of these would have invariably been a state church (Catholic, Orthodox, or Reformed), it is understandable that our forefathers would be concerned if the membership would mingle or worship together with these other churches. The beliefs and practices were so different that such fraternizing would be harmful and lead to confusion and spiritual loss.

While this may be an oversimplification, it appears to be the perception many have today when seeking to understand the historical context for this church standard. Today in North America, we are “worlds apart” from our forefathers’ experience in terms of culture, national government, and the number and types of churches that surround us.

In addition, our way of life has become more complicated. This is true not only when compared with the European culture of a few generations ago, but equally true when compared with American culture from the same period. Some of the influences responsible for dramatically reshaping American culture and lifestyle include urbanization, the advent of mass media, the rise of materialism, and the widening influence of state-sponsored (“public”) education. How different our life might be today if just one of these influences did not exist.

Nevertheless, they do exist, and have been channels through which new values and philosophies have come in as a flood. Although we will not explore these influences in detail, it is sufficient to note their pervasiveness and power in radically reshaping society. These influences have brought new challenges that we, as a church, must also contend with.

Although our society has witnessed dramatic change, it is inadequate to view our position of maintaining spiritual separation as merely an issue of failing to make cultural adjustments. If we wish to revisit the relevance and application of this church standard, we will want to consider it primarily in the light of Biblical teachings. It is a fundamental principle that we try to understand our needs and challenges in light of Bible teachings and not take the reverse approach. It is the difference between trying to understand our life by the Bible and trying to understand the Bible by our life. To this end, we will consider three Bible teachings that are relevant to this topic: Brotherhood, Unity, and Discernment. First, however, it may be helpful to make some observations regarding denomination.

2. Christian Plurality

According to one online source, there are approximately 2.2 billion adherents to Christianity worldwide.² Highlights of the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey indicate that 76% of American adults consider themselves “Christian”, with 34% specifically identifying themselves as “Born Again or Evangelical Christians”.³

Within this vast population of professing Christians, there are natural barriers of geography, culture, and language. However, these did not necessarily lead to the formation of distinct denominations, as witnessed by the many different churches even where language and culture are the same. To the contrary, based on the New Testament scriptures, we would expect the Gospel to transcend these natural barriers. Lines of demarcation, therefore, were formed for other reasons.

Throughout history, individual churches were denominated, or marked, by their definition of doctrines, traditions, and practices. The sum of these had the effect of drawing boundaries that delineated who they were, what they believed, and what they practiced. Being thus identified, it enabled them to organize and function together, serving the Lord in ways they believed to be right.

In this, the ACCN is no different. Its two primary doctrinal statements (both drafted before the denomination divided), the 18-point *Statement of Faith* and the *We Believe* document⁴, serve to summarize the defining beliefs of the ACCN.

Today, there are a staggering number of distinct denominations. One respected source lists more than 1,200 Christian denominations in America alone.⁵ Another source documents more than 33,000 Christian denominations worldwide.⁶ Although estimates vary, they are evidence of fundamental differences and, in many cases, significant to the point of being irreconcilable. It is little wonder one unknown writer would describe modern Christianity as a “dizzying variety of incompatible Christian traditions”.

Responding to this reality, some believe that “denominationalism” itself is the problem, and strive to establish non-denominational churches and ministries. There is a push to “break down the walls” and other “man-made barriers” that have divided the Church. Somehow, it is believed that if we will dispense with labels, “just” believe the Bible, and love Jesus, we will be united.

John D. Roth, a professor of history at Goshen College, has called this idea an illusion. "Anyone who claims to be 'nondenominational' is simply willfully blind to the historical traditions and biblical interpretation that is shaping their understanding of faithful belief and practice."⁷ In other words, pastors and teachers who claim to rise above "denominationalism" will still interpret the Bible according to a particular theological tradition: they will promote certain practices and worship styles, and will inevitably pass these things down (i.e., tradition). The combination of these efforts will always result in the formation of boundaries. Ignoring denominational boundaries does not change the fact that such boundaries are inevitable.

There is another factor significantly impacting denominations in America today. It is widely recognized that loyalty to one's denomination is diminishing. The trend toward non-denominational settings, whether they are mega-churches, community churches, or specialized ministries and events, results in a general loss of allegiance to one's denomination. Again, to cite Professor Roth, "In 1955, only 1 in 25 people changed denominations in their lifetime. In 1985, the figure was 1 in 3. Today it is closer to 1 in 2."⁸

What does this significant change indicate? Why are people growing restless? Is it due to increased spirituality? Do we experience the effects of this within the Apostolic Christian Churches? If we try to accommodate this restlessness, will we retain dissatisfied members? What is the right way to respond to this spiritual wanderlust?

Many believers imagine that the answer to the fractured state of modern Christianity is found in the popular saying "In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity." This noble-sounding ideal (incorrectly attributed to Augustine), has become a maxim repeated by many Christian and even non-Christian leaders. Popes and presidents have cited this quotation. Its appeal is obvious, but it does not answer the point it assumes: who decides what "the essentials" of the Christian faith are?

In view of the complications wrought by the existence of so many denominations, it is no wonder that many are biased against "denominations". However, it should be evident by now that one cannot disengage from this reality simply or easily.

3. *Yea, all of you be subject one to another*

We now turn our attention to the aforementioned Bible teachings. Germane to this discussion is the teaching of Brotherhood. The Lord Jesus called his disciples into fellowship: fellowship with both the Father and the Son, and with one another. His church is a spiritual community, wherein all are brothers and sisters. Quotations from the *We Believe* document⁹ declare that this concept is highly valued within the ACCN:

“It is in the congregation that the work of teaching, witnessing, and disciplining is carried on. Congregations are committed to the Word of God and to each other. Consequently, the work of the brotherhood is conducted in a spirit of interdependence, love, and submission to one another under the Lordship of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:5-6).”

“We believe that the Church is called to be a brotherhood under the lordship of Jesus Christ, a loving fellowship of brothers and sisters who are concerned for the total welfare, both spiritual and material, of one another (Ephesians 4:11-16). This concern results in the attempt to help the erring brother or sister find the right path; it includes sharing generously financial aid, encouragement, and a willingness to give and receive counsel (1 Corinthians 4:11-16).”

Historically, it has been the happy experience of many within the ACCN to enjoy the strong sense of connection and closeness among members. Even when traveling far from home, it has been common for the visitor to be warmly accepted into homes of people who otherwise might be strangers, except that both visitor and host are members of the same fellowship. It is not the hospitality itself, but in the spirit of brotherly love that motivates it, which makes this fellowship so precious.

This closeness springs from something much deeper than cultural or familial considerations. It is rooted in a common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is found in the concept of membership, of being members one of another. It is expressed in the meaningful use of the titles “brother” and “sister”, and in our custom of sharing greetings. It is strengthened by the knowledge that each has willingly entered into this brotherhood on the same terms.

As noted earlier, it is natural that such a community of believers will have boundaries. They help define what belongs and contributes to the well-being of the brotherhood, and what does not. In this setting, accountability, commitment, and loyalty are the norm, not the exception. This type of environment is integral to enabling us to pursue and experience the scriptural ideals referred to in the above quotations.

In contrast, modern Christianity appears to be departing from the idea of church membership. Instead, individuality and personal freedoms are emphasized, and the thought of making a lifelong commitment to a particular church is in large part viewed as too restrictive, even unspiritual. This attitude, however, is more reflective of changing attitudes in society rather than teachings of Scripture.⁵

We should ask ourselves some questions about these contrasting ideas. What is more consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ? A church that...

- Requires loyalty and commitment, or dispenses with the idea of membership?
- Defines clearly what it means to belong, or keeps such requirements to a bare minimum?
- Emphasizes accountability or emphasizes personal freedom?
- Encourages each member to actively participate, or is served by talented professionals?
- Shares communion only within the fellowship or with anyone who happens to be present?

4. *That they may be one*

Related to this topic is the Lord's teaching on Unity. He prayed that his people would be one: one as He and his Father are one, united not divided. The following passages teach about unity:

- John 13:34-35; 17:11, 17:20-23;
- Acts 1:14; 2:1, 2:41-46; 4:32-35;
- Romans 12:4-5, 12:9-10; 14:13, 14:19; 15:5;
- 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:3, 11:16; 12:12-27;
- Ephesians 1:10; 2:6, 2:14-16, 2:19-22; 4:1-6, 4:11-16;
- Philippians 1:27; 2:1-5; 3:15-17;
- Colossians 3:12-16;
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15;
- 1 Peter 3:8;
- 1 John 1:3-6

They teach that unity is established by first being joined to Christ. It is through union with him that we have a basis on which to be spiritually united with one another.

This unity with Christ necessarily includes agreeing with his teachings as recorded in both the Gospels and the Epistles, the doctrines of the Lord and the Apostles. (John 16:12-13, Ephesians 2:20) In other words, unity in Christ is a unity that is based on divine truth. This does not mean that we will fully understand all Bible teachings, but does mean that we will uphold that which we do understand, and that we are committed to hold the Word of God above even our own wisdom and logic.

This, of course, is the crux of the matter. People understand the doctrines and teachings differently. One certainly cannot use the word "unity" when describing the contemporary Christian Church. Consider this sample of differences in beliefs among professing Christians:

- Some believe the Bible is the holy, inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God; others believe it has become filled with errors and is more the work of man than of God.
- Some believe the Genesis account of a six-day creation is literally true; others believe it is allegorical and the theory of evolution must be accommodated.

- Some believe that Israel is God's chosen people that He continues to work with; others believe that God has given up on the Jews.
- Some believe that people will either inherit eternal life or everlasting punishment; others believe that God will ultimately save everyone and no one will perish.
- Some believe our will is free to choose; others believe that we are so depraved by sin that we have no ability to choose right.
- Some believe that God truly wants every individual to be saved; others believe He has unconditionally selected only certain individuals to be saved and nothing will change this.
- Some believe Jesus died for everyone; others believe that He only died for the elect.
- Some believe that once saved, it is possible to apostatize and forfeit the gift of eternal life; others believe one is eternally secure regardless of what decisions they make subsequent to becoming a Christian.
- Some believe that repentance is a condition of salvation; others believe repentance only happens after one has become saved.
- Some believe in baptizing only those who have attained the age of accountability; others believe in baptizing babies or children, still others believe baptism is unnecessary.
- Some believe holiness is a real requirement of Christian living; others believe living a separated life and avoiding worldliness amounts to legalism.
- Some believe the Church should avoid entangling itself with the political affairs of the world; others believe we should advance social reform through political action.
- Some believe discipline of erring Christians should be practiced by the Church; others do not.
- Some believe the sins of fornication and adultery should result in excommunication; others do not discipline those guilty of such sins.
- Some believe sodomy is an abomination; others believe that sodomites can pastor the Church.

- Some believe the Church is responsible to maintain certain expectations from its membership; others believe the Church cannot ask anything that is not specifically spelled out in the Bible.
- Some believe it is always wrong for the follower of Jesus to fight or kill; others believe Christians can fight in the military.
- Some believe it is a violation of Scripture to ordain women as pastors; others practice this.
- Some believe the gift of speaking in tongues gave one the ability to speak in other known languages that were previously foreign to them; others believe it is manifested in unintelligible speech.

Although oversimplified, the above demonstrate the serious disagreements that deeply divide the contemporary Christian Church today. How should we respond to this fact?

It is true that even the first Church was challenged with false teachings. Yet we cannot stop there. What did they do about it? The Apostles responded by addressing the issues directly and extensively. Doing nothing was not an option for them. How should we respond to this confusion in the 21st century?

This is not simply an academic question for those who have nothing more important to do. This is an important question for everyone who takes the Scriptures seriously. What should be our spiritual relationship with those whose doctrinal understandings are fundamentally different? Will ignoring these differences lead to Christian unity? What promotes true unity? What threatens it? What efforts should be made to guard this unity? It is one thing to be critical of a church's efforts to experience and guard Christian unity; it is another to find answers to these questions.

5. *Beloved, believe not every spirit*

The previous listing of doctrinal contradictions is evidence of another challenge confronting the Church, that of deception. This speaks to our need for Discernment. In his Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus emphasized how dangerous and widespread deception will be. To guard ourselves against deceivers, we must discern their “fruits”.

This is an important point; discernment is to be exercised both on what preachers preach and on the results of their preaching and teaching. In our world of instant results and tolerance, we may not have the patience or fortitude to examine fruit carefully. Perhaps we are afraid to discern fruits, lest we judge others. Yet our Lord emphasized to us, “ye shall know them by their fruits.” True doctrine will lead to right living; false doctrine will lead to error. The Apostle Paul spoke of the doctrine according to godliness; therefore, if the teaching and preaching does not produce fruits of godliness, we need to be wary.

Today, it is abundantly clear that many who claim to love Jesus Christ also love the world. This is witnessed among professing Christians who listen to the world’s music, watch the world’s entertainment, and adorn themselves as the world, while claiming to live for Christ. They say they love the Lord but they are conformed to the world. It appears they have either no idea how or interest in living a holy, separated life as taught in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. We may regard these things as personal liberties, but the Lord sees these things as fruit. Unsound teaching leads to unsound living. Consider:

In a report published by The Guttmacher Institute in May 2010,¹⁰ 37% of all abortions performed in the United States are performed on Protestant Christian women, and one in five (20%) of all abortions are done on women who identify themselves as born-again, evangelical, charismatic or fundamentalist.

In a survey conducted and published by the Barna Group in September 2004,¹¹ the following was stated about divorce among Christians: “If we eliminate those who became Christians after their divorce, the divorce figure among born-again adults drops to 34% - statistically identical to the figure among non-Christians.”

These shocking statistics are proof that many are deceived. Multitudes name Christ but such fruit shows otherwise. It was for this reason the Lord warned us to examine their fruits. He said that

many who thought they were serving him would not be saved. They will claim to know the Lord, but He will say He never knew them. They will say they have worked for the Lord, but the Lord will say they have worked iniquity. We must be careful what teachers and teachings we embrace because they can eventually lead us someplace much different than where we expected.

It is no wonder the Apostle Paul tells us to mark those who bring contrary doctrines and avoid them. The Apostle John says we should not even bid them God's blessings. In fact, the Bible is not silent on the danger of being deceived and our need to separate from unwholesome influences.

- Matthew 7:15-23; 24:4-5; 24:11-12;
- Acts 20:28-31;
- Romans 16:17-18;
- 1 Corinthians 5:11-13; 10:14-21; 11:19;
- 2 Corinthians 6:14-17; 11:3-4; 11:13-15;
- Galatians 1:6-9; 5:7-9,
- Ephesians 4:13-14;
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21;
- 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 3:6-15;
- 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 6:3-5; 6:20-21;
- 2 Timothy 2:16-19; 3:1-5; 4:2-5;
- Titus 1:9-16; 3:9-11;
- Hebrews 13:9;
- 2 Peter 2:1-3; 3:16-17;
- 1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-3;
- 2 John 7-11;
- Jude 3-5;
- Revelation 2:2; 2:14-16; 2:20;

Knowing how widespread deception is, how should we keep our fellowship safe from its dangers? Do these scriptures not command that practical measures be put in place? Is it reasonable for churches to fend individual believers to fend for themselves? Is it right for shepherds to give the responsibility of watching for wolves to the sheep? What should be done? Doing nothing would be tantamount to negligence.

6. Questions of application

The forefathers of the Apostolic Christian Churches chose to maintain a closed community of believers. It was not closed in the sense that they did not evangelize or otherwise interact with those outside the community: it was closed in the sense that pulpits and communion tables were not shared, marriage was only with those within the fellowship, and members were expected not to worship with other churches. It was closed in the sense that brotherly mingling with those belonging to other church groups was discouraged. This was done with the intent of protecting the Church from spiritual error and confusion. However, it can equally be said this was done as an outworking of the biblical teachings of brotherhood and unity.

Undoubtedly, the purpose of this standard has often been misunderstood and, at times, misrepresented. We will explore and respond to some of the criticisms that are leveled against maintaining a closed community:

Criticism 1 — “Forbidding mingling is not biblical.”

What is meant when someone claims something is not biblical? Does this mean that a church cannot be specific on any matter, unless the Bible, in particular the New Testament, is specific? To believe the Church cannot establish order and practices unless such items are spelled out in the Scriptures is to suggest the Holy Spirit does not work within the congregation and its leadership to give direction. The “show me where it is written” attitude regarding church order may be a form of legalism.

The real question here should be whether this policy is a reasonable application of biblical principles. Obviously, opinions may differ if it is reasonable. However, those who wish to dispense with this have the burden to show what alternative will be more effective in guarding the Church from spiritual dangers and, at the same time, enriching the experience of brotherhood.

Criticism 2 — “Forbidding mingling implies all other professing Christians are heretics.”

One may interpret our position as implying this, but that is an interpretation. It may be a perception often repeated, but that does not make it true or correct. It may not even be logical. Consider, if a

father makes a rule in his house that watching television is not allowed, it does not mean he believes there is absolutely nothing worth watching on television. It means he believes the risks far outweigh the benefits. To our point, even if the father believes that many people watch sinful programming, it cannot be reasonably concluded that he thinks everyone who owns a television watches sinful programming. He has simply taken this position based on what he believes is best for his family.

In similar manner, the forbidding of mingling with other churches does not mean we imply only we are true and all others are false. This does not follow logically and we specifically repudiate this assertion.

Criticism 3 — “Forbidding mingling is hypocritical.”

Is it hypocritical to maintain a closed pulpit and communion, to require marriage within the fellowship only, to prohibit attending other churches, and then to acknowledge there are other true Christians in the world? No, it is not, for reasons discussed above in response to the second criticism. What would be hypocritical is to represent we believe it is wrong to marry outside the fellowship, but then privately encourage it or allow it. It would be hypocritical to discourage attending worship services outside the circle of the ACC Churches, but then do so ourselves in secret. That would be hypocrisy.

This assertion may also ignore the fact that what has been required is a relative – not an absolute – spiritual separation. We sing songs written by non-ACC believers, there has been attendance of weddings and funerals hosted outside the ACC fellowships, etc. We do not forbid the reading of books written by authors from outside the ACC Churches. In these things, we encourage discernment and caution, as in all things of life.

Some may believe it is inconsistent to hold to a relative separation instead of an absolute separation, but that is an opinion. It is likely influenced by the presumption that the reason for our stance is that we believe everyone else is a heretic. As stated earlier, we specifically repudiate this presumption.

Criticism 4 — “Forbidding mingling does little to preserve doctrinal integrity.”

What proof is there of this assertion? Can it be shown that ACC Churches that no longer discourage fraternization have experienced, as a result, stronger adherence to the historical doctrinal understandings? This criticism also seems to imply church leadership

relies solely on this standard of not mingling. This is not true. Church leadership understands that this alone will not ensure preservation of doctrinal integrity. Preaching and teaching from the pulpit, Bible studies, special presentations and writings, are all ways through which concerted effort is made to preserve sound doctrine.

The point here is that the leadership does not believe this church standard of not mingling is the sole answer to doctrinal challenges. Furthermore, reviewing the independent statements of faith issued by ACCN congregations who no longer maintain this policy, gives evidence of the shedding of doctrinal teachings that are not popular in mainstream Christianity. From this observation, the opposite can be argued, maintaining this policy has helped to preserve doctrinal integrity.

Criticism 5 — “Forbidding mingling leads to theological understandings that are too narrow.”

It is possible to have doctrinal understandings that are “too narrow”; however, that does not mean this statement is true. The Apostles forbade mingling with those they deemed to be in error. Did that result in doctrinal understandings that were too narrow? Should we gauge our doctrinal integrity based on the broader stream of Christian thought? As shown earlier, there is systemic contradiction within modern Christianity. It has bred confusion, not clarity.

The above criticism ignores the many efforts made by brethren to engage in careful and responsible doctrinal studies for the benefit of others. It is a subjective claim to assert that we are too narrow theologically because we do not freely mingle with others. As with the previous point, it can be equally claimed that not freely mingling has helped safeguard us from doctrinal error.

Concluding Thoughts

We live in a time of dramatic change. This change involves the very structure of society, and affects the way people interact, learn, and even think. The impacts made on our life, families and church are probably more significant than we realize.

It is clear that modern Christianity is filled with a plurality of doctrines, traditions, and practices. While some differences may be of little consequence, other differences are consequential and involve fundamental beliefs. In view of these differences, the existence of denominational boundaries is inevitable. However, many think that such boundaries are problematic and even despise the idea of lifelong loyalty and commitment to the Christian fellowship in which one has come to know the Lord. It has become common place for people to change churches. This has the appearance of discontent and restlessness, not increased spirituality.

In contrast, the circle of Apostolic Christian Churches has historically valued the ideals of loyalty and commitment. In doing so, it has maintained a relative spiritual separation from other church groups. On one hand, this separation is inevitable because it is in acknowledgment of denominational boundaries. On the other hand, it is emphasized to help safeguard the Church from spiritual error and to promote a close unity and true experience of brotherhood. As we understand the importance of these objectives, let us be committed to upholding them for the welfare of our beloved Church.

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End Notes

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