

Dangerous Doctrine: The New Apostolic Reformation in Plain Clothes

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world...They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

1 John 4:1, 5-6 ESV

The Bible warns us in many places of false teachers and their doctrines. It warns that in the last days perilous times will come. This is the world we are living in. One example of such doctrines is that of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). This term was coined by C. Peter Wagner, a founding father of the movement. However, the label is now more often used by outsiders, and those within it generally reject the label while embracing the doctrines it represents. In their book *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*, authors Brad Christerson and Richard Flory have opted to use the term “Independent Network Charismatics” as a more palatable term to those within this movement. In this discussion, I will use NAR since that is the more widely-known term, though I do appreciate the perspective of Christerson and Flory and have learned much from their treatment of the subject.

The NAR is a rapidly-growing and influential global movement. While its roots are in the charismatic movement, it increasingly reaches people from a wide variety of denominations. Even some formerly from conservative Anabaptist groups have joined NAR churches, such as Bethel Redding in California.

In recent years, these doctrines have taken the more subtle guise of a revival movement across a spectrum of conservative Anabaptist churches. While in various places it has given rise to new congregations holding these views, it extends far beyond these local gatherings through conferences and seminars held across the country. This article will focus on the movement in Anabaptist circles, which I will call the Anabaptist-Background NAR (ABNAR), though I will highlight some teachings of the broader NAR

movement for context, since the ABNAR also holds to the teachings of the broader movement.

What are the marks of this doctrine? According to Holly Pivec and R. Douglas Geivett, coauthors of two books on the movement, the key distinguishing feature of the NAR is a belief in the present-day offices of apostle and prophet. This stands in contrast to those who simply recognize the spiritual gifts of prophet or apostle. Traditional Pentecostal groups, such as the unregistered churches of Eastern Europe, and present-day kingdom movements, such as Followers of the Way, may use the term apostle in a broader sense. Apostles in these groups are church planters, like Timothy and Silas in the New Testament who were not part of the twelve and did not have the governing authority of twelve. The NAR, however, uses this terminology to mean something quite different. In the NAR version of five-fold ministry (taken from Ephesians 4:11), apostles and prophets hold the governing authority of the twelve in the book of Acts and speak for God like the prophets of the Old Testament. Revival comes by recognizing and submitting to the apostles and prophets.

Those who hold the NAR offices of apostle and prophet typically work together closely. One example of this is Bethel Redding, with Bill Johnson as the apostle and Kris Valloton as the prophet. The ABNAR also recognizes these offices, and a key feature of their conferences is “calling out the gifts” and recognizing anointings on various individuals. They freely use the titles apostle and prophet among themselves, but tend to be cautious about using the terms when speaking to a broader Anabaptist audience.

Apostolic authority is a cornerstone of the ABNAR. Since the apostles are speaking for God, what they say is rarely challenged. The apostles and prophets from various locations form a loose network. They hold special events together and bolster each other with revelations and prophecies. A senior apostle may even anoint and pray for others so they can receive his mantle.

Flowing from this authority of the apostles and prophets is an emphasis on personal revelations. These revelations are often introduced by phrases such as “God showed me...”, “God revealed to me...” and “I’m seeing...” This also results in an allegorical approach to scripture with interpretations based on personal revelations and proof-texting. Any critique of these teachings is generally dismissed as coming from a

demonic “religious spirit.” If the critique is based on scripture, the one bringing the critique may be accused of deifying scripture.

Along with the emphasis on gifts comes a focus on signs and wonders, emphasizing texts such as Mark 16:17-18:

“And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

John 14:12 is often taken out of context to support their claims: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.”

The NAR sees the work of the church as bringing the atmosphere of heaven to earth and believes that where this is truly evident, people will be healed or delivered from ailments, financial difficulties, and other problems. This is especially the case with the ABNAR. Following the teachings of such men as Henry Wright, a Seventh Day Adventist, and Derek Prince, an early leader in the Shepherding Movement of the 1970's, difficulties such as chronic illnesses and financial problems are seen as the result of agreements with demons and generational curses or iniquities which must be “broken off” to achieve freedom and prosperity. This even affects their stance on politics, since their interpretation of Genesis 12:3 means that if they support political leaders who promote the modern state of Israel, they will be blessed.

Another doctrine of the NAR is that of strategic level spiritual warfare, the belief that geographic regions are under the control of “territorial spirits” and that believers must take authority over these demons in order for the kingdom to advance in this region. The ABNAR has done this by praying or conducting meetings from elevated locations that overlook a given area, by pouring anointing oil at the source of a major river in a region, and other similar methods.

A leading NAR author named Lance Wallnau is a key proponent of an NAR teaching called the Seven Mountain Mandate. The ABNAR has embraced this doctrine in

particular. According to this view, believers advance God's kingdom by taking over seven “mountains” of culture: education, religion, family, business, government, entertainment, and media, and so taking over society. This means prosperous businesses play a role in taking over the business mountain and channeling the world's wealth into the kingdom. It also has political implications since politicians who advance agendas favored by the NAR are part of bringing about this dominionist kingdom of God.

This stands in contrast to the true Kingdom of God as embraced by the early church, the early Anabaptists, and other faithful groups through the centuries. The Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the New Testament is that of a called-out nation of strangers and pilgrims, united under Christ as king, shining as lights in the darkness of the kingdoms of this world. In spite of persecution and hardship, they love sacrificially, extending this kingdom until Christ has triumphed over the kingdoms of this world and His reign is complete in the new heavens and new earth.

The dominionist kingdom on the other hand consists of the NAR co-opting influential aspects of society and taking control of them. Gaining this power is a sign of God's blessing and that is bringing God's kingdom to earth. The dominionist NAR exchanges the upside-down Kingdom reality of heart-change for the definition of success held by earthly kingdoms and employs their methods to achieve it.

The NAR is intentionally non-denominational, preferring to be seen as a move of God that transcends churches and backgrounds. That is why it operates as a loose network while denying that it is an organized movement. This appeals to those weary of traditional church structures, but it also frees the apostles and prophets of any meaningful accountability. Hierarchical church structures are often dismissed by the ABNAR as being under the control of an “empire spirit.”

The ABNAR is strategically ecumenical. To point out doctrinal error is to create division, and in their view division is the main problem the church faces. If they “recognize the life of Christ” in someone, that person is received as a brother.

Doctrinal differences are glossed over, even when that requires ignoring clear scriptural teachings. Rather than teaching and discipling people in these areas, the ABNAR finds unity in shared NAR beliefs and ecstatic worship practices. The ABNAR is strategic in that

people coming into the movement often maintain the appearance, including dress, of the group they came from. So people coming from an Amish background may still look Amish, and so forth. This seems to be a calculated effort to both demonstrate that this is a revival movement across denominations and to reach people still in those settings.

To recap, here are some hallmarks of the NAR, and of its ABNAR form in particular:

- A belief in the present-day offices of apostle and prophet that govern the church
- An emphasis on the authority of the apostles and prophets to speak for God
- An emphasis on personal revelation at the expense of scripture
- A focus on signs and wonders
- A view of financial prosperity and health as the sign of God's blessing
- A belief in strategic level spiritual warfare
- A dominionist “Seven Mountain Mandate” view of the kingdom
- An intentionally non-denominational loose network structure
- A strategically ecumenical approach

What is the antidote to all this? I believe that can only be found in a genuine move of the Holy Spirit among the gathered body of believers. For those from traditional and fundamentalist-influenced Anabaptist backgrounds this has often been stifled by their traditions and structures. It has left those coming out of these groups longing for revival. Unfortunately, too many have mistaken the counterfeits outlined here for the genuine work they desire. We must instead follow the example of the Bereans and examine how these teachings align with scripture. We must also look at the fruit of these teachings in the lives of those who promote them and those impacted by them. And finally, we must also consider the historical sources of these teachings. In doing so, as others have said, we will find that this movement is not new, not a reformation, and not truly apostolic.

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