



ACOP FAITH, LIFE, AND THEOLOGY MINISTRY TEAM

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# OUR ACOP HERITAGE

AN INTRODUCTION TO WHY  
THEOLOGY AND CHURCH  
HISTORY MATTER

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# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION WRITTEN BY VERNER DROST

**M**y wife's grandfather was Clayton Stewart. He was a legend in the recent history of the Miramichi area in New Brunswick. As an entrepreneur, he worked and pioneered many new ventures in the woods and in the community. He worked in the lumber camps, worked as a cook, ran a store, had a garage, and guided American salmon fishermen up and down the Miramichi River. He wrote books about his life in the Miramichi, and the area museum has historical collections of items donated by him and his family. At his funeral, his eulogy was read, which he had written himself. He had insisted in his will that it be read word for word just as he had written it. It started like this: "My family started with Tiny". Tiny was his wife, the love of his life. Clayton was uncomfortable with certain things that had happened in his family (parents and grandparents), so he did not want to acknowledge his ancestry. His story, his family, started with Tiny.

The truth is, and we all know this, Clayton's history and family did not just appear out of nowhere when he married Tiny. A little research reveals an ancestry path, a DNA trail, all the way back to Europe and beyond. The language he spoke, the culture he embraced, the land he lived on, the Federal and Provincial laws he had to follow, and the country he called home point to a story and a rich history of people who came before him, settled in this land, and gave him birth and a history.

We Evangelicals, Protestants, and, in particular, Pentecostals tend to do something similar to what Clayton did. We often behave as if our family started in the 1500s and the early 1900s, respectively. As Pentecostals, we trace our beginnings to the Reformation or to Pentecostal revivals and tent meetings, such as those on Azusa Street, and to individuals like R. E. McAlister and Rev. Frank Small in Manitoba, O. J. Lovik in Saskatchewan, as well as the Davis Sisters, Earl Jacques, and others in Eastern Canada.

We look at these pioneers and historical landmarks with deep love and nostalgia, as if to say, "My family started with..."! But that is not the actual case. We come from an almost 2000-year-old history of faithful people who "contended earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 NKJV). We are deeply thankful for the essentials of the Christian faith that they passed down to us.

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# WHY CHURCH HISTORY MATTERS

The following sections include contributions from the ACOP Faith, Life, and Theology Ministry Team.

**T**he Bible, with its 66 widely accepted books, that we read and accept as scripture did not just appear with us. Each book, when it was first written and distributed, was discerned and received by God's people as authentic and God-inspired. In the process of canonization (The process of recognizing which books were truly Scripture), these books were examined to ensure apostolic or prophetic origin, authenticity (doctrinally faithful), widespread use in worship, and spiritual impact. The combination of expert witness and widespread community consensus led to the formalization of the Hebrew (OT) canon in the first century and the New Testament in the fourth century. These books form the canon and the standard for all Christians to this day.<sup>[1]</sup> (Note: The footnotes in this article are important for clarity).

When we see a sign on the highway that says, 'speed limit 80 km/h', there is a universal standard that defines what a kilometre is and what an hour is. In the same way, this list of books is what orthodox Christians consider to be the inspired Word of God and the standard for all we believe.<sup>[2]</sup>

Apart from the canon, there are other essential doctrines formally articulated in the creeds and held by all orthodox Christians that separate them from cults.<sup>[3]</sup> In a theological sense, cults are movements or groups that claim to be Christian but deny or distort one or more of the essential doctrines of the historic Christian faith, especially regarding the nature of God, Jesus Christ, and salvation.<sup>[4]</sup> The historical Christian Church articulated and defended these key doctrines within the first four hundred years. Later, the Great Schism of 1054 divided the Christian Church into Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Eastern Orthodox) branches. The Protestant Reformation began in 1517, dividing the Western Church between Roman Catholics and Protestants. We, as Pentecostals, are part of a larger stream of Protestants who emerged from the Reformations of the 16th and 17th centuries. We are also part of the Western Church, distinct from the Eastern Orthodox Church in culture, tradition, structure, and liturgy. Finally, Pentecostals are part of the larger family of the historic Christian church, which includes all churches and denominations that believe in such key doctrines as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, salvation in Christ, his two natures, the Trinity, and the Nicene Creed (381) as a valid formulation of essential doctrines.<sup>[5]</sup>

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[1] The word Canon refers to the official list of 66 books recognized across the main historic branches of Christianity as inspired by God and authoritative for faith and practice. There are other extra books that are not considered canonical by all, commonly referred to as the Deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church, the *Anagignoskomena* ("things to be read") by the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Apocrypha by Protestants.

[2] In Christianity, "orthodox" (small "o") refers to being faithful to the fundamental and widely accepted teachings of the early historical Church. Not to be confused with the Eastern Orthodox Church (capital "o").

[3] Creeds are formal statements of beliefs that define the core teachings of a faith community or the orthodox Christian Church.

[4] Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are considered cults because they hold to an unorthodox view of who Jesus is, amongst other important fundamental doctrines.

[5] The Nicene creed was originally formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325. At the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene Creed was expanded and finalized and became known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed or the Nicene Creed for short. The *Filioque*, "and the Son," clause was officially added by the Roman Catholic Church in 1014 and separates the Western from the Eastern church.

We also share our affirmation of the Apostles' Creed with most Western churches; while Eastern churches do not typically use it liturgically, they affirm the same core doctrines.<sup>[6]</sup> The Apostles' Creed affirms the Trinity and the incarnation, while the Nicene Creed further clarified both the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, that Jesus was fully God and fully human.<sup>[7]</sup> Groups that reject these essential doctrines are considered unorthodox and, by many, cults.

## THE ROLE OF THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

**B**y “theological tradition,” we do not mean human customs placed above the authority of Scripture. Instead, we mean the united witness of the early Church to its fundamental teachings, preserved across history, that guides how Scripture is faithfully understood, taught, and confessed. Theological tradition is not some dead religious extra weight we can dispense with, but a living witness to the truth. It serves as an essential heritage, something handed down, a safeguard, a guide that keeps us from straying into error. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Scripture to “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught, whether by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Jude exhorts us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

The true gospel was passed down through oral tradition and written Scripture from the Apostles to the early Apostolic Fathers, from the Apostolic Fathers to the Church Fathers, from the Church Fathers to the historical Christian Church as it spread across the world, from the Christian Church in the world to the Reformers who contended for the faith that was once passed down to the early Church, from the Reformers to the Revivalists. It has now been entrusted to our generation of Christians.<sup>[8]</sup>

## WHAT ABOUT OUR ACOP FAMILY?

**F**or us in ACOP, this means that our story is larger than our beloved pioneers of the 1920s. Their zeal for revival and for the move of the Holy Spirit stands within a much older and wider stream of Christianity. If we view our story as beginning only with Frank Small, we risk cutting ourselves off from the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who contended for the faith passed on to us. We also risk identifying with the cults rather than with the Christian Church. Nearly every cult claims to have recovered an original teaching that the historic Church lost and that the rest of the Church contradicted. As Pentecostals, we recognize that our heritage includes the treasures received from the Revivalists, the Reformers, the Church Fathers, the Apostles, and ultimately from Christ himself.

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[6] The Apostles' Creed had its beginnings in 2nd Century baptismal formulas but evolved over time. It arrived at a form nearly identical to the current text by the late 4th Century and was standardized in its final form by the 6th to 8th centuries.

[7] From its early history, the Christian Church has taught that there is only one God (Heb. Elohim), who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons (Latin: personae; Greek: hypostases), each distinct but not separate, yet of the same divine essence or substance (Greek: ousia), one God. The word that was used to define this Christian understanding of God was the word Trinity ('tri' meaning three + 'unity' meaning oneness = Three are one).

[8] The term “Church Fathers” refers to the influential Christian teachers, pastors, theologians, and writers of the first centuries of the Church whose writings and leadership helped shape Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation. They were the successors of the Apostolic Fathers and their teachings. The term “Apostolic Fathers” refers to the earliest Christian writers immediately after the Apostles, traditionally understood to have been disciples of the Apostles or very close to their circle. Their works helped maintain faithfulness in the post-apostolic church.

Our Pentecostal emphasis on the present work of the Holy Spirit represents not a break from historic Christianity, but an important reemphasis of the Spirit's role in the life of the Church from its earliest history.

This does not mean we are to adopt every doctrine or practice introduced in church history uncritically. As Pentecostals, we must “test all things by the Word of God and hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We gratefully embrace the key elements of theological tradition, including the Canon of Scripture, the Nicene Creed as a standard of orthodoxy, the original understanding of the Godhead as a unity and a Trinity, and the full divinity and humanity of Christ. With other Protestants, we also reject some medieval inventions that we hold as unbiblical, such as transubstantiation, the immaculate conception, indulgences, and purgatory.

The strength of tradition is its time-tested witness. Newer teachings come and go. But the essentials of our faith, delivered to the Apostles and the Church Fathers, must abide. Theological tradition does not replace the authority of Scripture, but it helps us read Scripture in the counsel of the saints across the past centuries. We must guard ourselves against the arrogance of believing that truth begins with us, or that we alone can decide what correct Christian doctrine is.

As we pass on our ACOP heritage to the next generation, we must remember that, like the story of Clayton Stewart in the introduction, our family story did not begin in 1921. We are part of a story that began with Christ and was passed on to us by faithful believers who taught us the Gospel truths we now proclaim. To embrace this larger Christian heritage is what will define the ACOP as an orthodox Christian community. It is to acknowledge that the Canon matters, the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” matters, and the essential doctrines expressed in the Nicene Creed matter. It is not to lose our Pentecostal history but to deepen it by recognizing that the Holy Spirit who moved at Azusa Street is the same Holy Spirit who has been leading the Church since Pentecost.

As “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19–20; 2 Tim 2:2), we owe it to our ACOP churches and congregations to affirm what the Nicene Creed says and teaches, as well as what the early church taught about who the Christian God is and who Jesus is. This is not just a commitment to the apostolic tradition, but also deeply sound biblical teaching, a very important value in our ACOP history.

