



APOSTLES TODAY

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” [Ephesians 4:11-13](#)

When considering those who lead and serve in the Church, people may be familiar with titles such as priest, vicar, reverend, bishop, minister, and pastor. However, many of the titles used cannot be found in the Bible, or have been used in a way that is inconsistent with their original meaning. At the same time, certain biblical ministries seem absent or are ignored. In this and the next three sessions, we are going to look at specific roles of leadership and service that God has ordained for His Church. We will begin with those listed in the above passage, focusing in this session on apostles.

WHAT IS AN APOSTLE?

Unlike titles such as priest or prophet, which have a rich heritage in the Old Testament, *apostle* first appears in our Bibles in the New Testament and was introduced by Jesus Himself.

The English word *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos*, which literally means “one who is sent or dispatched.” By New Testament times, however, *apostolos* had come to be used by Greeks and Romans to refer to specially commissioned leaders who were sent out to advance their empires. These *apostles* were typically proven generals or admirals, and were given power and authority to pioneer into new territories, transforming the culture as they went.

Similar to what we have seen with the Greek words *baptizo* and *ekklesia*, Jesus deliberately took this familiar word, with everything it already conveyed of authority, commissioning, and kingdom advancement, and gave it new application and significance. We will benefit by keeping its original meaning and use in mind as we now consider the nature and role of apostles in the Church.



APOSTLES IN THE BIBLE

The word *apostle(s)* is used 81 times in the New Testament, in each case referring to an individual(s) chosen, authorized, and sent out to accomplish a specific mission. We can, however, identify at least three “categories” of apostle referred to in Scripture:

First and foremost, **the Lord Jesus Christ**. He is the ultimate “sent one,” and as we saw in the last session, He is the “**apostle and high priest of our confession**” (Hebrews 3:1).

Secondly, the twelve apostles in the Gospels. As mentioned earlier, it is from Jesus that we first hear the word *apostle* in the New Testament, as the designation He gave to those He specifically selected to be with Him and to be sent out by Him (Mark 3:14). The Twelve (Judas Iscariot having been replaced by Matthias: see Acts 1:26) are referred to in Revelation 21:14 as the “**twelve apostles of the Lamb**.” They were clearly unique, and their role as witnesses of the events in Christ’s earthly ministry was of particular significance (Acts 1:21-22).

Thirdly, the apostles given by the risen Christ. Having chosen and sent out the twelve apostles, the Lord subsequently gave other apostles to His Church after His resurrection and ascension. These are obviously the apostles referred to in Ephesians 4.

Of course, the most prominent New Testament apostle, Paul, comes within this category. Other apostles mentioned in the New Testament are James, the brother of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6, 9), Silvanus/Silas (in the “we” of 1 Thessalonians 2:6), and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). Note also the general reference to the “**apostles of the churches**” in 2 Corinthians 8:23 (NIV 1984). Paul’s condemnation in 2 Corinthians 11:13 of “**false apostles**” shows that the Church must have accepted that there were many apostles beyond the Twelve, otherwise no one would have been able to pretend to be one. Similarly, in Revelation 2:2, the church in Ephesus is commended for testing those who claimed to be apostles but were not. If there could be no legitimate claim to apostleship beyond the Twelve, what testing would there need to be?

This “category” of apostles continues to the present day. The Scriptures are clear that apostles (along with prophets and the more traditionally accepted ministries of evangelists, pastors and teachers) are to function “**until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**” (Ephesians 4:13). Unless we believe this is an accurate description of the state of the Church today, we need apostles now.

APOSTLES TODAY

During the first 100 years of the Church (known as the Apostolic Period), apostles were widely recognized and received, and functioned effectively. However, the increasing institutionalization of the Church contributed both to it drifting farther and farther away from true apostolic ministry, and to the distortion of the very concept of the apostle. It ceased to be a term that could be applied to ordinary men with a practical and necessary ministry in the Church, but instead took on a mystical aura.

Therefore, from the first century until relatively recently, though God still graced certain individuals with clear apostolic gifting (for example Martin Luther, John Wesley, William Booth, and Watchman Nee), few were actually called apostles in their day. Thankfully, we are living at a time when the reality of and necessity for apostolic ministry is increasingly being recognized and can, therefore, have its full, intended effect in the Church. The growing acceptability of apostles has led to some churches just attaching themselves to an “apostolic network,” or having a “token apostle” who has little involvement in the local church, or to whom the church pays mere “lip-service.” In situations like this, the absence of real apostolic involvement often proves to be the root of many of the problems they face. If we are to take the Scriptures seriously, we must realize that we simply will not be unified, or brought to maturity, without true, functioning apostles.

THE GIFTING AND CALLING OF APOSTLES

Unlike the other Ephesians 4 ministries, the function of the apostle is not obvious from the name. Prophets become recognized as such by their prophesying, evangelists by evangelizing, teachers by teaching, and pastors by shepherding. There isn't an equivalent verb for the apostle. How, then, can we recognize true apostles, and what do they do?

APOSTLES ARE PIONEERS

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” Acts 13:2-3

When considering apostles, we should keep in mind the simple core meaning of the word: an apostle is “one who is sent”—sent by God to pioneer new territory for His Kingdom. Apostles are initiators, often sparking off new projects, breaking ground with the gospel, and planting new churches. One of the characteristics of an apostle is the ability to function to a significant degree in all of the other Ephesians 4 gifts, i.e. prophecy, evangelism, teaching, and shepherding. This is essential, particularly in the formative stages of a newly-planted church, when other ministries are not yet in place and the apostle must supply what is lacking.

The Western church is primarily built on pastoral ministry, and can, therefore, tend to become inward-looking. However, churches built on an apostolic foundation, with the regular inspiration of the apostle's involvement, will usually be far more missional by nature. As networks of churches grow, there is a danger that the apostle can merely become (or be seen as) the head of an institution. Although apostles play a very important role in bringing care and maintenance to the people of God, they should remain passionately given to expansion and always ready to be “sent.”

APOSTLES LAY FOUNDATIONS

“...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,” Ephesians 2:19-20

Nothing determines what can be built more than the foundation. To build well requires not just a plan or blueprint, but also an architect's visionary skill and experience. The spiritual landscape today is littered with churches that have been started by individuals who have “desire without knowledge” (Proverbs 19:2), passion but not sight. Sadly, the result is invariably frustration and injury both for them and for those in their care.

Apostles bring the necessary insight, skill, and experience to the building of the Church, in accordance with the blueprint we have in Scripture. Apostles and prophets are often together known as **foundation ministries**, because their visionary interaction and impartation lays the foundation for local church life (see Ephesians 3:2-5).

In Acts 9, we read of Paul's dramatic encounter with Jesus and his consequent conversion. Blinded by a heavenly light, he was made to realize that, in persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Jesus. His natural sight was restored three days later, but more importantly he went on to receive extraordinary vision and insight into the heavenly realms and God's intention for the Church. A defining moment for Peter in his apostolic calling was his God-given revelation of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” and it was on the basis of this revelation that Jesus said His Church would be built (Matthew 16:13-18). Apostles carry a major significance in church-planting and leadership because of their ability to understand Church in the context of the overall plan of God, and to see what the Church should look like if it is to manifest Christ. They can see the overall “shape” of a church situation and have the God-given authority, wisdom, and gifting to do what is necessary to help it.



APOSTLES ARE GIFTED BUILDERS

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.” 1 Corinthians 3:10

Although we have used the term *architect* to highlight an aspect of the apostle’s role, it could misrepresent the true nature of his labor. When Paul describes himself as “a skilled master builder,” it conveys the “hands-on,” rather than merely advisory, nature of his apostolic work.

Of course, with all these building analogies, we must not forget that the apostle is working with “living stones”—people (1 Peter 2:5). Subsequently, the masterful dynamic of true apostolic gifting is often evidenced most in the ability to envision, inspire, and win the hearts of others.

Also, God’s equipping of apostles is not limited to the other Ephesians 4 giftings already mentioned. It may range from moving in signs and wonders to discerning and dealing with issues that threaten to hinder the building work. Apostolic intervention might bring to light a sin issue that has festered under the surface and jeopardized a church. Sometimes apostolic involvement will be a forerunner to a significant move of the Holy Spirit, encouraging the people and bringing a fresh dynamic to the work. In these and many other ways, apostles tend to be agents of change and development for churches.

APOSTLES ARE TEAM LEADERS

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,” Philippians 1:3-5 (NIV 1984)

The apostolic heart is to work in team, and apostles are able to draw leaders and other gifted ministries into effective working relationships. As noted above, apostles tend to be able to move in all of the other Ephesians 4 gifts, and this allows them to identify, connect with, encourage, and inspire these ministries. Apostles will typically work alongside such men and women, and will send them at times to work with other individuals and churches.

Rather than being hierarchical, these partnerships are built on mutual love and respect, and the recognition of the joining of God. For example, though Paul clearly carried authority within his apostolic sphere, he spoke of those joined to him as “fellow servants,” “fellow prisoners” (literally, “co-fighters”) and “fellow workers” (Colossians 4:7-11). He was clearly committed to them, expressing love, concern, and appreciation for them. In return, they responded in loving and enthusiastic service, submitting their gifts and their very lives for the accomplishing of the apostolic mission. Far from being crushed or limited when working with apostles, many leaders find that they become clearer as to their identity and purpose, and experience a wonderful expansion and fruitfulness in their ministry.

Though called to work closely with others, an apostle must be completely given to God’s agenda. There is no room for personal ambition or politics in the apostle or his team. He must be free from attempts to influence and control him through, for example, flattery or criticism. He must be secure in his calling and able to exercise discernment, grace, and patience as he interacts with many different gifts and personalities. If apostles function in this way, they will become secure hubs from which the other ministries will draw great strength, encouragement, and fulfillment. In turn, the entire Church will grow in its revelation of unity and its development to maturity.

APOSTLES REPRESENT GOD’S PARENTAL HEART

“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” 1 Corinthians 4:15-16

It is not just about gifting. Many passages of Scripture, including the one above and the following ones, give us wonderful insights into the heart of the apostolic ministry:

“...though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” [1 Thessalonians 2:6-12](#)

“Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” [Acts 20:31](#)

No matter how gifted a person might be, we must keep in mind the heart the apostle should have if he is to care effectively for a church—the heart of a loving father and nursing mother. Apostolic ministry has been misrepresented and given a bad name by those who have behaved like company CEOs, or operated in an unapproachable, authoritarian style. This is the opposite of the humble, servant-hearted expression we see in Scripture—and could indicate that the men in question are false apostles! True apostles recognize that they are servants of Christ and that they must prove faithful with that which has been entrusted to them (see [1 Corinthians 4:1-2](#)).

“An apostle does not just set up an empire of churches over which he reigns and from which he receives glory and honour. Instead the charge of all the local churches that God gives him becomes a gut-wrenching, intensely emotional, heartfelt, passionate ministry of life to precious souls! It is an awesome responsibility. It is not an arms-length transaction. The apostle must feel the very heartbeat, the pulse of the church, and be in touch with the lives of its people.” — Dick Iverson

APOSTLES GOVERN AND BRING ACCOUNTABILITY

While apostolic ministry is expressed at times in tender encouragement and advice, that only reflects one aspect of the parental role. It is also evident from Scripture that apostles bring government and direction into the affairs of the local church. As well as exhorting and comforting the elders and churches, Paul was not averse, when necessary, to instructing, admonishing, and commanding:

“...each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.” [1 Corinthians 7:17 \(NIV 1984\)](#) (see also [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#))

The government that apostles are to bring to churches goes, of course, to the very foundation. Ideally, apostles should be involved in the birthing of churches and in the initial establishing of leaders within them. One of the growing, biblical trends in the Church these days is the shift from a one-man leadership model to that of a plurality of elders. However, what is often ignored is the fact that biblical eldership was built on biblical apostles. Local elders were not the product of a democratic church vote, but were appointed by or at the direction of apostles:

“And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” [Acts 14:23](#)

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—” [Titus 1:5](#)

Apostolic involvement did not end there. It is clear in the New Testament that the apostles continued to bring instruction, direction, warning, and correction to the elders and deacons of the churches, not just through their written communications, but by taking every opportunity to meet with them:

“As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.” Acts 16:4 (NIV 1984)

“Now from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.” Acts 20:17

Though all Ephesians 4 ministries are God’s gifts to the entire Church (see 1 Corinthians 3:21-22), and in a very real sense are the blessing of God to all who will receive them, this does not mean that every apostle can or should seek to carry government into every church. The apostle Paul recognized this:

“If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” 1 Corinthians 9:2

“But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another.” 2 Corinthians 10:13-16 (NASB)

WORKING WITH APOSTLES

The governmental authority that apostles bring is critical for a church’s protection and development. However, it only works in the context of voluntary submission and loving relationship—which is the only context in which a true apostle would want to work. The following scripture shows us how apostolic authority should be received in the local church:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Acts 2:42 (NIV 1984)

Sadly, in this as in many areas of life, past experience has left many damaged or disillusioned, either by harsh and excessive authority, neglect, or the facade of “nominal” apostleship. However, we must not let these wrongs rob us of authentic apostolic leadership, which God has designed to be an indispensable blessing to the Church. When someone has truly received revelation of this highly significant and foundational ministry, it becomes far more than a mere style of church leadership. It becomes one of the most critical issues to be considered in joining a local church.

“ACCORDING TO THE GRACE OF GOD GIVEN TO ME, LIKE A SKILLED MASTER BUILDER I LAID A FOUNDATION...”

1 Corinthians 3:10



“LORD, RAISE UP APOSTLES!”

Having understood just how important apostles are for the unity and maturity of the Church, the obvious question many have is, “How does someone become an apostle?”

As with all Ephesians 4 ministries, it is the risen Christ who gives apostles to the Church. Only God can call and equip someone for apostleship. They appear to be trained, to a large extent, in the challenges of life, often undergoing many hardships and disappointments as they are shaped to function in the sufficiency of God’s grace. Far from the glamorous notion some might have of apostleship, theirs is not an easy road, as Paul plainly points out:

“For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.”

1 Corinthians 4:9 (NIV 1984)

However, for the true apostle, success is measured in just one way—simple obedience to God. For our part, we must pray that God will continue to raise up apostles who, like Paul, will give themselves unreservedly so that a glorious Church might be built upon a firm foundation, ready for and worthy of the return of King Jesus:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” 2 Timothy 4:6-8

SUGGESTED READING

1. “A Review of Biblical Evidence for Present Day Apostolic Ministry and Authority” by Stuart Cathrow (available for download at www.teaching.onechurchministries.com)
2. *Apostles Today* by David Matthew
3. *Does the Future Have a Church?* by Terry Virgo