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**“WHO ARE THE APOSTLES OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT? CAN WE HAVE APOSTLES
TODAY AND, IF SO, WHO WOULD THEY BE?”**

By Leanne Majdali

Introduction

There is a fundamental imbalance amongst theologians and scholars today regarding their perception and exegesis of Scripture regarding apostles. For some the defining of an apostle remains strictly with the original twelve disciples. With their work complete, the foundations of the church set, the canon of Scripture closed; the branches can continue to bear fruit thanks to the deep “apostolic roots”. As such, it is concluded, the office of apostle did not continue after the last of the twelve died. Like the ministry gift of “prophet” in Ephesians 4:11, it is considered incorrect, if not arrogantly presumptuous, to allocate the title of apostle today.

However there are those who offer a contrary position. Apostles are not obsolete like dinosaurs. Indeed, these voices say apostles are alive and well and they continue to do the work that was started in the first century. This essay’s purpose seeks to answer the question “Who are the apostles of the New Testament? Can we have apostles today and, if so, who would they be?” This essay begins by defining the term apostle. It will look at New Testament writings and the arguments for and against. It will examine those who believe the office of apostle is forever gone and those who say it continues today. Finally, it will offer an answer to the question: if we have apostles today, who might they be?

Apostle Defined

Exactly what is an apostle? To begin one must take a look at the language in which the New Testament was written to better understand its significance. The Greek use of *ajpovstolo* (*apostello*), translates to apostle. It is an action word meaning to send forth,¹ messenger, one sent with a commission, to send away. From this the English translation of missionary is birthed, and, as Duffield states, an apostle is commissioned by Christ.²

Apostles were pioneers in making of converts and planting churches. They were exposed to special dangers. When persecution erupted, they were the primary targets for attack.³ Paul in particular welcomed such suffering; it was his way of participating in Christ’s suffering.⁴

Sending a person on commission alone does not necessarily make them an apostle. The first century apostles fit a unique function that is impossible to replicate. “Apostle” was first used to describe a distinct people in the New Testament. The most celebrated were the twelve disciples.⁵ Some were called apostles of the churches,⁶ while others falsely claimed themselves to be apostleship.⁷

¹ Bromiley 1986: 67

² Duffield 1988:348

³ 1 Cor. 4:9–13

⁴ Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5–7

⁵ Matt 10:2

⁶ 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25

⁷ 2 Cor 11:13

Paul's description includes people who, like himself, were not included in the Twelve, but who saw the risen Christ.⁸ John Edmiston says that part of being an apostle are the signs and wonders that follow the ministry.⁹ A second unique aspect was some were authors of Scripture. Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter were the most prominent and together wrote twenty-one of the twenty-seven New Testament books. They are the New Testament counterparts to the Old Testament prophets, some of who also wrote Scripture. However, it must be stated from the outset that not all Old Testament prophets or New Testament apostles had the privilege of writing Scripture. While all will agree, some still use this fact to say that there could not possibly be apostles today because the Bible is complete. Others will use this same point to say that because not all wrote Scripture, it cannot be the litmus test for an apostle today.

Apostolic Leaders

The apostles were the first leaders of the church. First in time,¹⁰ first in authority,¹¹ first in ministry,¹² and first on the list.¹³ These lists read in order of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. Of this five-fold ministry, two are considered general and three are defined. The teacher, prophet and evangelist are specialised and the pastor and apostle are considered general.

The pastor is a general practitioner, and must proclaim all of God's council, not just one subject or single revelation. The apostle does the same but in a wider arena. The apostle is not single-eyed; in fact many different offices are practised while the apostle establishes the church. The first function of an apostle is as an evangelist who leads people into salvation. Next is the office of teacher, aiding them to maturity in Christ. Eventually some are chosen as co-workers and church leaders and so the apostle becomes a pastor, while doing all of this the apostle is a prophet that challenges the church in the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ The disciples practised all of these things with signs and wonders following.

Matthew Henry says the apostles, prophets and evangelists were extraordinary. The apostle is the chief, with extraordinary gifts and power to work miracles. They deliver with infallibility God's truth. The apostles witnessed Christ's miracles and doctrine; they were the sent ones with a commission, to plant and govern the church.¹⁵ They served with Christ and saw His resurrection, this is something that will never again be repeated or witnessed.¹⁶

Other Apostles Besides the Twelve

⁸ "Apostle," Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary [CD Rom], accessed 7 May 2004.

⁹ John Edmiston. Are there still Apostles Today?

¹⁰ Matt 10:1-2

¹¹ Mark 6:7

¹² Acts 2:37; 6: 1-4

¹³ Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28

¹⁴ Ekman 1996: 56

¹⁵ Matthew Henry Vol 4: 703

¹⁶ Mounce 2000: 5

Being an apostle was not just limited to the twelve disciples; there were others who were called and had a foundational role in spreading of the Gospel. These were sent into regions that had not yet heard the Gospel. They included Matthias,¹⁷ and Paul.¹⁸ Paul announced himself in all but four of his letters, as an apostle of Jesus Christ. In Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1-2 Timothy and, Titus, and was especially defensive of his apostleship in Corinthians and Galatians.¹⁹ Other apostles were James the brother of Jesus,²⁰ Barnabas,²¹ Apollos,²² Timothy,²³ Titus,²⁴ Silas or Silvanus,²⁵ Tychicus,²⁶ Judas,²⁷ Andronicus,²⁸ Junia, a woman,²⁹ Epaphroditus,³⁰ Erastus,³¹ and two unnamed apostles.³² The Lord anointed another seventy whom he sent out two by two to every place and city.³³ These were not considered apostles in the same sense of the original twelve but they did preach, teach and miraculous works; they were frontline pioneer missionaries.³⁴ Up to 500 people saw the resurrected Christ, but it is not clear how many of these were apostles, or if the above “non-twelve” apostles had been part of the “500.”

Apostellos occurs 135 times in the New Testament, mostly in the Gospels and Acts. *Pempo*,³⁵ which is used as in the Father sending the Son is a more general term than *apostello*, and occurs 80 times, 33 in John, 5 in Revelation, 22 in Luke/Acts, 4 in Matthew and once in Mark. In the New Testament *apostello* is used with the intention of sending forth to serve God with God’s authority.³⁶ It should be noted that Jesus was sent from heaven and dominated the Gospels. Jesus is the “Apostle” and High Priest of our profession.³⁷ During this time little was said about the Holy Spirit. After Christ’s resurrection, the Holy Spirit was sent and dominates from the Book of Acts until the present day.

According to Stanley Horton, Jesus as the Great Apostle needed little help in His mission. But the apostles were seemingly left alone, required the help and leading of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ While there is debate about whether Jesus’

¹⁷ Acts 1:26

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 15:8

¹⁹ Mounce 2000: 5

²⁰ Gal. 1: 19

²¹ Acts 14: 3-4

²² 1 Cor. 4: 6-9

²³ Acts 19: 22

²⁴ 2 Cor. 8:23

²⁵ Acts 15:22

²⁶ 2 Tim. 4: 12

²⁷ Acts 15:22

²⁸ Romans 16:7

²⁹ Romans 16:7

³⁰ Phil. 2:25

³¹ Acts 19:6

³² 2 Cor. 8:23

³³ Luke 10:1

³⁴ Cannistraci1996: 59

³⁵ Vines 1952: 342

³⁶ Bromiley 1986: 67

³⁷ Hebrews 3:1

³⁸ Horton 1997: 135

miraculous ministry was done from His divinity or Spirit-anointed humanity, there is no question that both He and the Holy Spirit were “sent,” like apostles, and they are the ones that ordain the apostolic office that officially begins in Acts. The major focal point of the twelve apostles was to fulfil the Great Commission. This witness was rooted in years of intimate knowledge, invaluable experience and intensive training. Their witness of the resurrection made them effective witnesses of His person, and He himself commissioning them as worldwide witnesses.³⁹ From their witness, churches would be established, disciples trained.⁴⁰

There are two types of apostles from the first century AD. The first is the group of twelve. To be one of these the person must meet certain conditions. They must have been part of the group that travelled with Jesus from the time John preached Jesus’ baptism until the time of his ascension.⁴¹ The twelve apostles had a function that no other member in the body of Christ will ever have. They were part of the founding of the church, several of them writing Scripture. Paul calls himself one of these apostles,⁴² and it can be concluded that there will never be another Paul. The twelve make up a closed circle that does not accept new additions after the acceptance of Matthias.⁴³

Deere says that there are five characteristics of an apostle.⁴⁴ The first is their suffering;⁴⁵ it’s not accidental but a divine intention. The second is the special insight into divine mysteries,⁴⁶ godliness,⁴⁷ and Israel’s conversion.⁴⁸ The third is signs and wonders,⁴⁹ the fourth being blameless integrity,⁵⁰ and finally apostolic authority.⁵¹

Craig Keener agrees that the apostles were literally commissioned messengers. The sender’s authority backed them to the extent that they accurately represented that commission. In the New Testament the term applies to commissioned agents of Christ authorised in a special way to declare and propagate His will.⁵²

The church is compared to a building. Jesus the cornerstone,⁵³ the prophets and apostles are the foundation.⁵⁴ A foundation is laid once and at the

³⁹ Acts 1: 8

⁴⁰ The Illustrated Bible Dictionary Vol.1: 79

⁴¹ Acts 1:21-22

⁴² 1 Cor 4:9, 9:5, 15:9

⁴³ Deere 1993: 243

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 1993: 245

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 4:9-13, 2 Cor 4: 7-12, 6:3-10, 11:23-33, Gal: 6:17

⁴⁶ Eph 3:1-6

⁴⁷ 1 Tim 3:16

⁴⁸ Romans 11:25-32

⁴⁹ Luke 24: 49

⁵⁰ 1 Cor 1: 2

⁵¹ Matt 10:1, Luke 10:19, Mark 9:38-41

⁵² Keener 1993: 547

⁵³ Eph 2: 9-22

⁵⁴ Frye, James M. “Are There Apostles Today?” www.scionofzion.com/apostles.htm, accessed 12 May 2004.

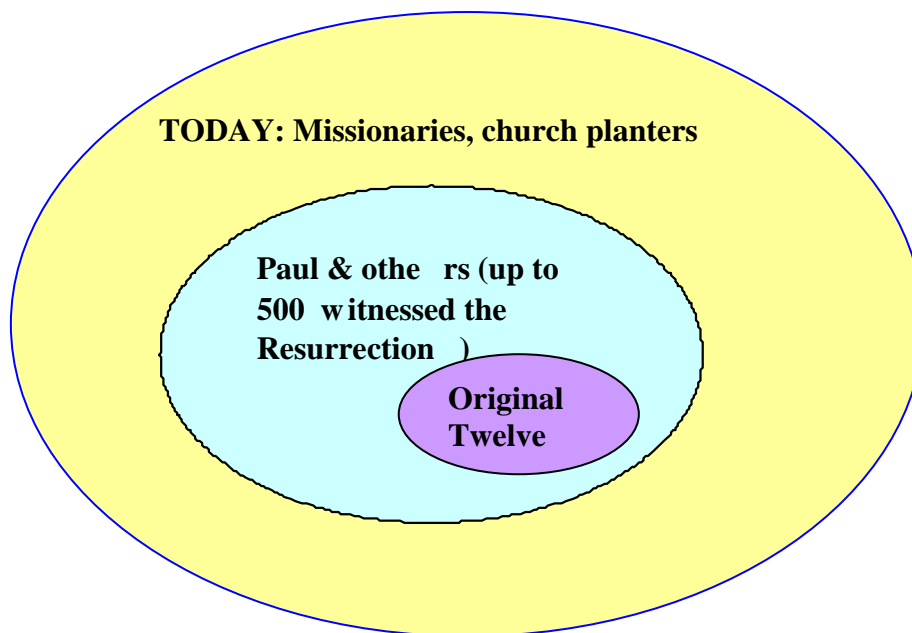
beginning. The apostles served as a foundation for the emerging church.⁵⁵ Since the apostles are considered the “foundation,” does it mean, as cessationists claim, that there are no apostles today?

What were the requirements of the person who replaced Judas Iscariot?

Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection (Acts 1:22 NKJV).

Verse 26 says the lot fell on Matthias and he was numbered with the eleven, thus joining that select and singular group called “The Twelve.” Jesus told these apostles that they would receive power from the Holy Ghost and be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.⁵⁶ This is exactly what happened.⁵⁷ Paul defended his apostleship by the fact that he also saw the risen Christ (I Cor. 9:1), others saw Jesus, but it was Paul who was the very last to see Him on the earth (I Cor. 15:7-9).

Apostles were handpicked,⁵⁸ Paul was.⁵⁹ Jesus appeared to Paul and he became a chosen vessel.⁶⁰ The twelve apostles were hand picked and active in the beginning but over time they disappeared from history, leaving only Peter, James the brother of Jesus and John to continue to do the work of the twelve.⁶¹



Are Apostles for Today?

⁵⁵ Luke 24:46-48

⁵⁶ Acts 1:8

⁵⁷ Acts 4:33

⁵⁸ Luke 6: 13

⁵⁹ Acts 9: 3-6

⁶⁰ Gal 1:1

⁶¹ Chadwick 1978:17

Robert Bowman says it has become popular to speak of the five-fold ministry as a system of church government. It includes apostles, pastors, teachers, prophets and evangelists. Bowman believes that apostles do not exist today and anyone seeking to restore such an office is actually laying a false foundation that will not support the building up of the body of Christ. He calls this restoration not only a mistake in exegesis but it opens the door to heresy.⁶² Ekman says that no area of ministry has been so well documented, so well developed in the New Testament as the ministry of the apostle. Yet the apostolic ministry has been misunderstood and poorly developed, resulting in many variations that some have come to fear it.⁶³

Apostles as Witnesses

As seen earlier apostles had to have witnessed the resurrection. Stamp agrees that apostles who witnessed the resurrected Lord and were given a commission to preach the Gospel and plant churches. They possessed a unique authority within the church that related to a divine revelation, the office of an apostle in this specialised sense is unique and unrepeatable. The original apostles can have no successors.⁶⁴ Stamp further says that although the first apostles laid the church's foundation have no successors, the church today is still dependant on their words, message and faith.⁶⁵

Duffield writes that Paul referred to himself as the last and least of all of the apostles. He believes that this is referring to the fact that there can no longer be any more apostles in the true sense in later times. He says the title of apostle only belongs to the first generation church, however the spiritual endowment needed for apostolic work will be poured as long as there are unreached peoples.⁶⁶

If one suggests that in order to be an apostle they have to have put pen to paper and written Scripture, then many apostles would be eliminated from the office.⁶⁷ Apostles were messengers commissioned as a missionary or for other specific responsibility.⁶⁸ Such as Barnabas,⁶⁹ Andronicus and Junias,⁷⁰ Titus and others,⁷¹ Epaphroditus,⁷² and James brother of Jesus.⁷³

Argument Against

There are few ministries today that call themselves apostles, unless they are part of the new apostolic reformation. Most people in church history who

⁶² Bowman 1987:31

⁶³ Ekman 1996: 9

⁶⁴ Stamp 1992: 1830

⁶⁵ *ibid.*: 1830

⁶⁶ Duffield 1987: 350

⁶⁷ *ibid.* 1987: 350

⁶⁸ Adams 2000: 1058

⁶⁹ Acts 12:4

⁷⁰ Romans 16:7

⁷¹ 2Cor 8:23

⁷² Phil 2:25

⁷³ Gal 1:19

claimed to be new apostles were branded as heretics and excommunicated from the church.⁷⁴ Lewis Chafer wrote:

The service of those designated in Ephesians 4:11 as apostles evidently ceased with the first generation of the church, for no such qualified ministry is to be recognised in the Church today.⁷⁵

Adams says:

Commentators have almost universally assumed that apostles have become extinct and have been replaced by the apostolic and prophetic word of the New Testament canon.⁷⁶

Deere quotes MacArthur who says there are six reasons why the apostolic office has ceased:

- The church was founded on the apostles
- Apostles were eyewitnesses to the resurrection
- Jesus Christ personally chose apostles
- Miraculous signs authenticated apostles
- Apostles had absolute authority
- Apostles have an eternal and unique place of honour.⁷⁷

Deere says MacArthur and others do not offer any scriptural text that backs their argument. Charles Ryrie is another who believes that apostles are not for today. He says that they were a gift given for the founding of the church only. He offers no scriptural reference for this belief.⁷⁸

Argument For

Those Christians who believe the apostolic office ceased along with the New Testament era, fail to differentiate between the original apostolic function that was represented by the twelve, and the perennial apostolic function. Thus, the church has been denied the benefits of apostolic ministry today.⁷⁹ The signs of an apostle are patience, signs and wonders and mighty deeds. Paul was an example of this. He came with outstanding "Fruit of the Spirit", followed by the "Gifts of the Spirit."⁸⁰

Jack Deere states that many believe that apostleship is a spiritual gift, but this assumption can not be proven. Paul never called it such,⁸¹ and how is it possible to call a person a spiritual gift?⁸² Paul says there are three requirements of apostleship (at least in his day); the first is a specific call and commission from Christ.⁸³ The second is the apostle must have seen the Lord and the third is that they have proof of their effectiveness in church planting.

⁷⁴ Cannistraci 1987: 77

⁷⁵ *ibid.* 1987: 80

⁷⁶ Adams 2000: 1062

⁷⁷ Deere 1993:247

⁷⁸ Ryrie 1999: 429

⁷⁹ Cannistraci 1996: 80

⁸⁰ Womack 1993: 175-176

⁸¹ 1Cor 12; Eph 4:11

⁸² Deere 1993:244

⁸³ Gal 1:1, Rom 1:1 1cor 1:1

The first is the most important because it is the foundation of apostleship.⁸⁴ Hayford differs slightly and states that the third requirement is having signs, wonders, and miracles.⁸⁵ Hayford believes that the role of apostle is for today.⁸⁶ Rea believes that apostleship as in missionaries continues today, but apostles as in the disciples no longer exist.⁸⁷ Wagner believes that the apostle and the missionary are two different gifts and the apostle has a place today.⁸⁸

Jack Deere writes that the apostles faced harsh sufferings and that it was a divine intent that they do so. God allowed them to be misunderstood so that the focus was on God rather than man. Deere continues that those claiming to be apostles today want no part of the suffering and persecution that their predecessors experienced. They live lavish lifestyles and encourage deference from the ordinary believer. They put themselves beyond rebuke.⁸⁹

Spiritual Gifts Still Flow

Jesus as the Head of the church was the first apostle;⁹⁰ He had the five-fold gifts. He was teacher, pastor, evangelist, prophet, and apostle.⁹¹ Spiritual offices are usually granted to a person for the good of the church such as prophet, apostle or evangelist,⁹² and not for the good of the person in office. The rise of Pentecostalism in the last century claims to see manifestations of spiritual gifts flow. If these gifts indeed have been restored—as many testified that they have, is it possible that an apostolic anointing is also part of that restoration?

A recent phenomenon, which some critics would label a fad, is called “The New Apostolic Reformation.” Its spokespersons are people like C. Peter Wagner, David Cartledge, and Renee Rodriguez. The latter says it is affecting the shape of Protestant Christianity around the world. In virtually every region of the world, these new apostolic churches constitute the fastest growing segment of Christianity.⁹³ While some, like Rodriguez, see it as a wonderfully restored gift to the church, others have seen it as a means of justifying arrogant, autocratic leadership. Only time will tell.

Conclusion

In one sense it is obvious that the apostles could not possibly exist today in the mould of the Twelve or Paul. It is agreed that none living today witnessed the resurrection of Christ or authored Scripture. We know that apostles were ordained for a particular purpose and that was to advance the Great

⁸⁴ Deere 2000: 244

⁸⁵ Eph 4: 11,13

⁸⁶ Hayford 1993: 98

⁸⁷ Rea 1998:212

⁸⁸ Wagner 1995: 56

⁸⁹ Deere 1993:245

⁹⁰ Hebrews 3:1

⁹¹ Ekland 1996: 35

⁹² Rea 1998: 214

⁹³ Rodriguez, Renee. What is The New Apostolic Reformation?

<http://www.agetwoage.org/ApostolicJustFacts1.htm> accessed June 2, 2004.

Commission. Some of them wrote the canon of Scripture, while others did not. They apparently exercised signs and wonders, but that was then. What about now?

Is it possible that apostles roam the earth today, in secret? An apostle is a witness, like Christians today who are witnesses, even though they did not witness the actual resurrection. Are there signs and wonders? In this day there are claims of many miraculous manifestations in the church of the developing world, though much less so in the West. Do apostles plant churches? Yes, but these are called missionaries and church planters. not apostles. Do they suffer? Yes, many do in the non-western world because they are persecuted for their faith. Do present day apostles suffer? If they are like Brother Yun of China, subject of the bestselling book *The Heavenly Man*, the answer is a resounding “yes,” though such suffering is less likely in the West.

The term “disciple” was used of the seventy, of the twelve, and even of the 120,⁹⁴ (though NU says “brethren),” thus giving the word an “exclusive” connotation. These disciples had spent time with Jesus. Yet the Lord Himself says to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Yet there is no problem assigning the term “disciple” to people today, even though they clearly have not spent time with Jesus when He was on earth. So if this is the case with “disciples,” then why not “apostles?”

Or what about “prophet,” which was used of Old Testament men of God, some who wrote Scripture. The New Testament has no problem labelling certain Christians as “prophets,” even though none of them appeared to have written Scripture.

While we can—and should—honour the special place of the Twelve, and of Paul and others; it obvious that God is still commissioning and “sending” people today with a special anointing and authority to go forth to evangelise and plant churches, in some cases with a miraculous touch upon their ministries. Avoid the term “apostle” if you must but, if this kind of work is not apostolic, or even “apostle-like,” then what is? A willingness to recognize that “God can do it again” and not be too rigid in our understanding could provide a wonderful impetus of missions and the miraculous to gather in the latter day harvest.

Comparison & Contrast of the Different Categories of

“Apostles”			
APOSTLES	TWELVE	PAUL et al*	TODAY
beginning			
Saw Jesus	YES	SOME, IF NOT ALL	NO
Wrote Scripture	SOME	PAUL, MARK	NO

⁹⁴ Acts 1:15

Sent to evangelise	YES	YES	YES
Planted churches	YES	YES	YES
Suffered	YES	YES	YES
Special authority & anointing	YES	YES	YES
Repeatable	NO	NO	YES
Called & Commissioned	YES	YES	YES
Miraculous Ministry	YES	YES	YES

* Includes Barnabas, Junia etc.

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