

ARE THERE APOSTLES TODAY?

The Testimony of Scripture

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Jesus Christ founded and established his Church, and he has continued to build it throughout the centuries. Among the many gifts he has bestowed on his people, there are those given specifically to their leaders for the building up of the Body. Such leaders are the officials of the Church, called and equipped by God – as well as recognized by God’s people – for the performance of their unique task.

Ecclesiastical Offices

God has given to the officials of his Church the responsibility to lead his people by example, by the administration of the ordinances, and by the teaching of the Word of God, which is the spiritual food of God’s flock. To them it is also given the responsibility to oversee and administrate the Church. Their work has been appointed by God for the edification of his people

Because of the great responsibility attached to the offices in the Church, God has required that officers meet certain conditions, to be qualified to fulfill their work. These can be found in many Scriptural passages (1 Tim. 3 is one of the best examples).

It is important to recognize that the leaders appointed for the Church offices have spiritual gifts that are present, in different degrees, in the non-officials of the congregations. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord. The Holy Spirit sovereignly confers the gifts and works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as he wills (1 Cor. 12:4-11). However, it is required of the Church officials that they have not only the gifts, but also the public recognition (viz., by the people of God) that they have been called and appointed for the offices of leadership in the Church.

The New Testament mentions three specific offices: apostles, presbyters (or bishops, or pastors; the three terms are used in Scripture in reference to the same office, cf. Tit. 1:5-7; Acts 20: 17; 28) and deacons. Throughout the centuries, different segments of Christianity have instituted different models of ecclesiastical government, because of their disagreement on which is the most biblical. However, there has been a historical consensus that the apostolic office is no longer present in the Church.

In recent Christian history, nonetheless, some have argued that there is no explicit verse in the Bible that specifically states the apostolic office is not extant. As a result, some churches go as far as to name their leaders “apostles.” Many Christians, therefore, are submitting to these so-called “apostles” under the impression that they are but following the biblical model, and that those leaders naturally have as much authority over them and the Church as Peter or Paul did.

This recent development, being so unique in the history of the Church, raises the question

as to whether there are apostles today. Is it true that denying the existence of apostles today is tantamount to denying the operations of the Holy Spirit among the people of God today, as well as the biblical model of church government? Does one quench the Spirit by denying that he could very well decide to raise apostles today? Do we have the right to believe God's freedom of choice and action is detached to his revealed Word? Alternatively, does his Word allow for such development?

To answer such questions, the first necessary step is to examine precisely what is the biblical idea of apostleship – its function, responsibility, and necessary qualifications.

The Meaning of the Word "Apostle"

In the New Testament, there are two basic meanings for the term "apostle." In the most broad, general sense, any person who might be sent by God through the Church for a particular work, whether of leadership or not (cf. Phil. 2:25), can be classified under the term "apostle." This broad meaning is derived from the correlation between the noun "apostle" and the Greek verb that means "to send." Hence, in this very broad sense, there is no difficulty with the concept that any Christian, in principle, can be called an apostle. For example, any person could be sent by a church to the mission field, and, in a broad, non-technical sense, this person is an "apostle" of God.

In the New Testament, however, the technical and restricted sense of the term is by far the most common. It refers only to the select group of the apostles of Christ. The word normally translated "apostle" (and its variations as noun and verb) is found 80 times in the Greek New Testament. It has the restricted and technical meaning of the word in no less than 73 of those instances. The broad, non-technical meaning (i.e., one who is "sent" for a task) is used only three times (John 13:16; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). One time it refers to Jesus Christ (Heb. 3:1). The remaining three occurrences (Rom. 16:7; Acts 14:4; 14) present exegetical difficulties that make it difficult to determine with certainty if they are employed in the technical or non-technical sense.

There is no controversy about the broader, non-technical sense of the Word. It could be applied in reference to any person sent by the Church to a specific task – although it is arguably unwise to do so, since it is likely to generate confusion (because the New Testament uses it in the technical sense in the overwhelming majority of the instances). Therefore, our focus here is on the more technical use of the word, viz., on the apostolic office, which some claim to have today.

The Apostles and the Scriptures

To understand properly the role of the apostles, it is essential to recognize that the New Testament was written by them and their close associates. To them it was given, by the Holy Spirit, the ability to precisely remember the words and teachings of Jesus (as well as to receive direct revelation after his ascension), and to teach and record them in a unified doctrinal whole without error.

Jesus told his disciples (later called apostles):

"These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (John 14:25-26)

Because of this, the apostles explicitly considered their own writings as being on the same level of inspiration and authority as the Old Testament Scriptures. They were aware that the documents they were producing were inspired by God as Scripture, and were to be received by the churches as such. This can be seen in the following examples:

. . . that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles. (2 Pet. 3:2)

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. (1 Cor. 14:37)

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. (1 Thess. 2:13)

. . . as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:16)

The word translated "Scriptures" in 2 Peter 3:16 occurs 51 times in the Greek New Testament, and refers specifically to the Old Testament (i.e., not just to any writing, but to the Word of God) in every occurrence. Clearly, Peter was referring to the epistles of Paul as being Scripture in the same sense as the Word of God in the Old Testament. Given the care and importance the sacred Scriptures had for all faithful in the first century, Peter was not likely to make such statement in a careless manner. It was evident to him and to the Church that God was providing his words for the New Covenant through the ministry of the apostles.

By virtue of the apostolic office, the apostles had the authority to not only receive direct revelation of the Word of God, but also to teach it to the Church. That a document had been written by an apostle or an apostles' authorized associate was the first and foremost criterion for it to be considered as eligible to be included as part of the New Testament Scriptures.

That being the case, one might wonder how documents such as the gospels of Mark and Luke, the book of Acts, the epistle to the Hebrews, and the epistle of Jude, were eventually considered as part of the New Testament canon. After all, Mark, Luke, and Jude were not apostles, and there is no certainty as to who is the author of Hebrews. Indeed, those books were received by the primitive Church because their writers were close associates of the apostles, and were writing under their supervision and presenting their doctrine. The biblical and historical evidence is that Luke was under the supervision of Paul, and Mark under Peter. Jude was one of Jesus' brothers. As to the epistle to the Hebrews, some (in fact, the majority) received it as being written by Paul; others, even

if not certain, recognized that its teachings clearly and directly reflected the apostolic doctrine.

The apostolic office cannot be understood apart from its function as the channel through which the Holy Spirit was pleased to provide the New Covenant writings to his people. The apostles were directly commissioned by Jesus to preach, teach, and write his inspired Word to the Church. Nobody had the authority to claim divine inspiration for his writings if he was not an apostle or one of his associates. Similarly, nobody, in the subsequent history of the Church, has ever had the right to include his or her writings as part of the Bible, since the canon of Scripture was closed with the death of the last living apostle – John (at the close of the first century).

If the apostolic office was to be extended throughout the history of the Church, any apostle, at any time, by virtue of his office, could expect the Church to receive his writings as direct revelation from God, inspired documents to be annexed to the Bible. All Christians, of course, would be bound to receive it and submit to it as the inspired Word of God. Since this is impossible, it is *prima facie* impossible that there could be any apostles after the apostolic age, let alone today. Yet, there are other reasons that also substantiate this conclusion.

The Apostles' Qualifications

There were two requirements for one to be qualified as an apostle:

1. The apostle had to be an eyewitness of the risen Jesus.

. . . until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:2-3)

Being an eyewitness was one of the requirements for the appointment of the one to be installed as the twelfth apostle in the place of Judas Iscariot:

Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

Similarly:

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33)

Paul the apostle was indeed an eyewitness of the risen Christ:

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that

if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." (Acts 9:1-6)

Consequently, Paul often emphasized that his credentials as an apostle were based on having been an eyewitness of the risen Christ:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? (1 Cor. 9:1)

. . . then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor. 15:7-9)

Paul clearly states he was the last apostle to be commissioned by Jesus. His description of Jesus' appearance to him is given in connection with his apostleship. Since he makes his statement under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is not possible that he was mistaken. One could perhaps argue that Paul simply meant he was the last apostle at that time, and that he did not know other apostles were to come in the future. However, like Paul and the other apostles, subsequent apostles would have had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus and be commissioned directly by him (see below) to receive and teach direct revelation. This is no longer possible, since the canon of Scripture has been closed.

2. The apostle had to have been commissioned *directly* by Jesus.

The twelve original apostles were commissioned directly by Jesus:

And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Lk. 6:13-16; cf. Mat. 10:1-7; Mk. 3:14)

Given such requirement, when the apostles felt Judas Iscariot's office as one of the 12 apostles (the number being typological of the 12 tribes of Israel) should be filled, they naturally sought not only God's wisdom, but also his direct revelation and appointment:

"Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and

apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:21-26)

Thus, Paul often emphasized that his credentials as an apostle were based not only on the fact that he had seen the risen Jesus, but also that he had been commissioned directly by him:

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead). (Gal. 1:1)

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:11-12)

Who Were the Apostles?

As previously mentioned, there were originally 12 apostles. Their number was typological of the leadership of the twelve tribes of Israel in the New Covenant. Besides the 12, only two people are explicitly mentioned as apostles in the New Testament: Paul and James (he brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, cf. Gal. 1:19; 2:9). Paul clearly states that the risen Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7); the apostles’ recognition of James’ leadership in Jerusalem on the same level as theirs is evidence that they understood James to have been directly appointed by Jesus. As shown above, the apostles considered this criterion as necessary for the apostolic office.

Barnabas (Acts 14:4; 14), Paul’s travel companion, might have been called an apostle in the Scriptures, although this is not certain. There are two possibilities: on the one hand, it is possible that the references in Acts 14 should be understood as corresponding to the technical use of the term “apostle.” In this case, given the requirements shown above, as well as the selective manner in which the New Testament designates one as an apostle, it is reasonable, if not necessary, to infer that Barnabas met the two requirements for the office. However, it is more likely that Acts 14 uses the broad sense of the term, since, in the context, Paul and Barnabas had been sent on a special mission by the church in Antioch, to which they were to report when their work was completed (cf. Acts 14:27). The emphasis in the passage is not in the office of the apostle, but on the missionaries/evangelists sent by the church.

It is not impossible that other individuals not mentioned in the Scriptures had the necessary qualifications and were considered apostles in the first century. The available data, however, establishes the following: first, even if there were any other apostles, they were a very select group (since very few could have had the two main qualifications), of which Paul was the last. This excludes the possibility that there were any apostles commissioned by God after Paul, i.e., after the middle of the first century, let alone today. Nobody can make a legitimate claim of having received a direct commission by Jesus, whether by vision or revelation, to the office of an apostle after Paul. God does not contradict his Word.

Second, no one could claim apostleship, who had not received authority for the writing of inspired Scripture, either directly from Jesus, or by one of his apostles. This is confirmed not only by the biblical evidence, but also in the history of the canonization of the Scriptures. The Church would not recognize writings as being Scripture if they were not produced by an apostle or one authorized associate. The early Church recognized that only the apostles were commissioned to bring God's inspired Word in connection with the New Covenant. Since the early Church also recognized that there were no apostles after Paul, it would not include any subsequent writings in the canon of Scripture.

The canon of Scripture is closed, God having both inspired and preserved his Word for two thousand years – hence it is not possible that there could be any apostles after the completion of that canon. Their main purpose, viz., of mediating the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles through the authoritative words of the incarnate God given directly to them, had already been fulfilled.

The Apostles' Role in the Church

Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us that the apostles had a definite role in God's plan in the building up of the Church. He told the Ephesians that the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the Church:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone. (Eph. 2:19-20)

Similarly, the apostle John describes the glorified Church of God having the apostles as its foundation:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev. 21:9-14)

Conclusion

The biblical evidence rules out the possibility that there could be any apostles after the first generation of the Church, i.e., in the first century. Consequently, there are no apostles today. They were a select group of eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, commissioned to their office by Jesus himself. Only they had the authority to write (or supervise the writing) of the New Testament Scriptures.

The canon of the Word of God, being complete, cannot be augmented by any document. Since the apostolic office by definition included the authority to write Scripture, it follows that it does not exist today, because that authority is no longer given by God to anyone. God no longer gives inspired and inerrant revelation to any person, under any circumstance. His infallible revelation is found exclusively in the closed canon of Scriptures.

It is important to stress that the ministry of apostles does indeed continue today – not in the person of anyone claiming to be an apostle, but in the New Testament. Every time the Word of God in the New Testament is read and proclaimed, the apostolic ministry and office fulfills its role. The apostles of the first century live on today, in the Church, through the Word God has given us through them.

According to that Word, Paul was the last apostle. The only offices that remain in the Church (even though there is a variety of ministries) are that of the pastor (or presbyter, or bishop – the three terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament and refer to the same office), and of the deacon.

God is sovereign and free in his decisions. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of freedom. Yet, he is also a Spirit of order. God has bound himself to operate according to what he has already revealed in his Word. He honors his Word. We should never expect him to add to it, to subtract from it, or to contradict it. 🌐



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