

The Ministry of the Apostle

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Part I

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Let me tell you a true story I recently read. It's about a Chinese minister whom the Western writer described as an "evangelist."

The nameless minister, whom we will call Reverend Wu, traveled by foot and on bicycle over a large region of China. As he traveled he gained converts to Christianity wherever he went through his preaching and teaching. After establishing a church, he would set a pastor and elders over the small flock, and then would move on to other, unreached areas to preach. As a result, he had established dozens of home churches.

On one occasion Rev. Wu returned to a region where he had not been for over a year to see how the churches were doing. When he arrived, to his dismay, he found the pastors quarreling and bickering among themselves. With one voice they began angrily explaining their differences, each looking to Rev. Wu for support.

Instead of hearing the arguments and trying to sort out who was right and who was wrong, Rev. Wu sat down and began to weep. His weeping deepened to the point that his very spirit was grieving before God. After a long period of unabated crying he began aloud to ask God's forgiveness for his own failure. He sobbed that he had failed to properly teach these pastors about Jesus' spirit of humility and of His teaching that "the first shall be last," and "the greatest among you will be your servant."

Then something happened. One by one the pastors also began to weep, crying out to God and asking His forgiveness. Soon, all present were prostrate on the floor in deep repentance. Then they began to go to one another asking forgiveness, even to the point of washing one another's feet.

Looking at Reverend Wu's ministry in light of Scripture, it is clear that he is an apostle. He traveled from place to place preaching, evangelizing and establishing churches wherever he went. Yet the Western writer of this story described him as an evangelist. Why?

Are There Apostles Today?

I believe the reason the story writer didn't understand that Wu is an apostle is because most people in today's church believe there are no apostles today. In fact most believe that only three of the original offices found in Ephesians still function today: pastors, teachers and evangelists. Somehow prophets and apostles have gotten lost along the way.

Concerning apostles, the reasoning goes something like this. "But brother Murphy, apostles were only in the first century church. There were only twelve of them. After those original twelve established the church and

died, there were no more after them. Nor was there a need since the church had been well established."

I understand that this is the common understanding today, but *does that understanding agree with the Scripture?* Let's look and see. The Scripture says,

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people to do works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **until** we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13 NIV, emphasis added.)

I have emphasized the word "until" in the Scripture above to make a point. Paul's use of "until" imposes the span of time these five ministries are to exist--**until we 1) all reach unity in the faith, 2) and in the knowledge of the Son of God, 3) and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.** Even a cursory observation of today's church makes it clear that **none** of these three conditions have yet been attained.

The Apostle Defined

I believe what I am saying will make more sense if we closely examine the Scripture and some related comments from theologians and other writers.

Let us begin by examining the original text word for the word "apostle." The word used in the Greek text is *apostello*. *Apostello* is a verb and refers to the *act of sending*. *The word apostolos* is a noun and refers to *the one sent*. The use of *apostolos* as a ministry is strictly New Testament. In fact, it was Jesus who first used *apostolos* as a title for His disciples. Prior to that the use of the word in secular Greek was narrowly limited to describe ships, or messengers that were "sent forth."

Since Jesus took the word *apostolos* and began to use it in a specialized, religious application, we need to make a detailed examination of *apostolos*. Theologian J. C. Lambert¹ teaches, "To understand the word as we find it in the NT it is not necessary to go beyond the NT itself." I agree and will confine our examination to Scripture and comments that theologians have made about the use of *apostolos* as found in Scripture.

Narrow and Wider Uses of the Greek Word *Apostolos*

With any word that evolves in a language, various shades of meaning are attached to the use of the word over time. *Apostolos* is no exception. In the early days during Jesus' ministry, *apostolos* clearly meant the Twelve. But

Lambert also said, ". . .the Gospel employs the term [apostle] in that wider sense which it came to have after the Ascension." Hence, the narrower use of the word *apostolos* means the Twelve while its broader use encompasses all others whom the Lord called as apostles as we will see in the Book of Acts, and in other New Testament books.

For those who may tend to reject the wider use of *apostolos*, claiming it applies only to the Twelve, Lambert further states, "The very fact that the name 'apostle' means what it does would point to the impossibility of confining it within the limits of the Twelve." He goes on to say, ". . . the very fact that he [Paul] found it necessary to denounce certain persons as 'false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ' (2 Cor 11:13) shows that there was no thought in the primitive church of restricting the apostleship to a body of 12 or 13 men. 'Had the number been definitely restricted, the claims of these interlopers would have been self-condemned' (Lightfoot, Galatians, 97)." [Note: Lambert quoted Lightfoot.]

A further, final definition of *apostolos* with its narrow and broad application is given by Alan F. Johnson in the NIV Bible Commentary²:

"An 'apostle' is one who is sent as a representative of another and bears the full authority of the sender. The word is applied first in the NT to the original circle of the Twelve, who had a special place historically in the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14). But the NT further broadens this original circle to include others such as Paul (Gal 1:1), Barnabas (Ac 14:14), James the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19,) and still others (cf. Rom 16:7). The name was applied to those who were authentically and specially called by Christ to be his authoritative spokesmen."

The Call of the Apostle

As with any call to the ministry, the initiative is the Lord's. No minister simply decides he wants to be an apostle, (or a prophet, evangelist, pastor, or teacher, for that matter). He must be called to that office by the Lord Jesus.

The most extraordinary thing about Jesus' call to His original apostles is that they were common, ordinary men. There was nothing that marked any of them as special. They came from various walks of life, some were fishermen, one a tax collector, there was even a disgruntled political reformer!

Notice that Jesus gave no explanation, no sales pitch, no promises or elaboration with his call. He simply said, "Follow me." That isn't very dramatic or compelling, is it? *But, to the one whom He calls, it has a powerful impact!*

Look at the call of Matthew (Levi). ". . . Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him." (Lk 5:27,28 NIV) It is obvious that Levi was wealthy. It took something very powerful to pull Levi from his lucrative income and comfortable life-style. The call to serve Christ is always powerful. Levi responded as a called apostle, he "left everything and followed him."

Attributes of An Apostle

As with any of the five-fold ministries, there are certain identifiable attributes. Not all apostles will possess all of these attributes. But most of the attributes will be found in any apostle. Let's look at them.

a. Forceful Personality

By "forceful personality" I don't mean rudeness or pushiness. I define forcefulness of personality as the consistent assertiveness of one's own person, ideas and presence. A person with a forceful personality cannot be ignored. We can easily see these attributes in both Peter and Paul.

Peter's force of personality was demonstrated by such events as his standing before the Sanhedrin, (Acts 4) his bold preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and his standing against the other apostles concerning his entering the house of the Gentile, Cornelius (Acts 11). Paul's force of personality is equally visible in his indignant demand that a sexually immoral man in the church be dealt with (See 1 Cor 5.), in defense of his apostolic ministry (2 Cor 10), and numerous other places in Scripture as well. Indeed, Paul's forcefulness comes through in all his writings.

b. Great Authority

In his examination of the word *apostolos*, K. H. Rengstorf³ says, ". . . the apostle is properly an apostle of Jesus Christ . . . Apostles, then, are not officials of the church but officers of Christ for its upbuilding . . ."

Since the apostle is not technically an officer of the church, he is not subject to the control of the church. This gives the apostle tremendous authority. This authority is further explained by Rengstorf.

"The apostles have special significance as leaders who enjoy the full accreditation of the Lord with a universal commission to what is to be a universal community. The Lord is still behind what they say and do. He himself is the subject of their message. In this new commissioning, however, this is an ongoing message to the world. . . ."

"The messengers' authorization is subsidiary to that of

Jesus. By the same token, however, it is he who sustains them in their office; hence the importance of the parakletos whom he sends.

"... the disciples are authorized to use the power of Jesus... the identification of the sender and sent presupposes authorization (the one sent is as the one who sends, and what is done to the former is done to the latter)... their authorization is linked with the person of Jesus... [they] have full power to speak and act as Jesus does, this does not confer rights but implies the duty of service... commissioning by Jesus means humiliation rather than exaltation. Service and humility purge the apostolate of the claims which might accompany its legal authorization. They make it a commission rather than an office...."

"Significant, too, is the linking of the apostles with the proclaiming of the word... Full and obedient dedication to the task is demanded. Action accompanies speech in demonstration of authentic commissioning. The works are not a subject of boasting or evaluation but of a joy that expresses a complete ignoring of the person and absorption in the task. The success of the apostles is the success of Jesus himself, and in [their] report it crowds out any reference to difficulties in the discharge of the task...."

"The new commission is also of a more lasting character, applying to the whole period between the ascension and return..."

Thus, as we have seen, the apostle is an officer of Christ whose primary responsibility is to found churches. The authority necessary to do this work is also inherent in the ministry. Jesus' authority is extended through the apostle. We can see the stated purpose of this authority in Paul's writing: "the authority the Lord gave me **for building you up**, not for tearing you down." (2 Cor 13:10 NIV, emphasis added.)

Let's look at an example of Paul's authority in action:

I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. (2 Cor 12:2,3 NIV)

Note however that this authority has limits. Paul told one of the churches he founded, the Corinthian church, "Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you!..." (1 Cor 9:2 NIV) By this we see that apostolic authority extends only over those whom an apostle has birthed and formed into churches. By implication Paul is hereby relinquishing authority over other churches with whom he had no part in founding.

c. Leadership Skills

Leadership is the ability to inspire others to action. Leadership radiates confidence, ability, control, and vision. Those with leadership have the ability to attract, and inspire others, and to motivate mass human effort toward a common goal. A leader also has the ability to read people, determine their strengths and weaknesses, and then place them in the exact organizational position to best use those strengths.

Leadership skills are essential for Christ's apostles since they are tasked with founding and building up churches. Peter demonstrated this kind of leadership when, on the day of Pentecost, he stood, began to speak and thereby took control of the crowd. Paul also demonstrated great leadership in Philippi, Ephesus, and other places through his preaching and church building. (Please note that leadership skills in varying degrees are common to all of the five-fold ministries.)

d. Possess Intimate Knowledge of the Lord

If mature apostles "have full power to speak and act as Jesus does," as Rengstorf says, this means they must possess a special knowledge of and closeness to the Lord Jesus. One way we can observe this intimacy with Christ is by the apostle's being directed by the Holy Spirit on an ongoing basis.

One example of this direction is when Peter and John stopped on their way to the temple, looked at the lame man and Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." (Acts 3:6 NIV). This act was totally unplanned. Obviously the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter and he moved in instant obedience. Some may say that Peter and the other eleven could do such things because they had watched Jesus do them.

But Paul was not one of the original apostles. He obviously gained his intimate knowledge of Jesus by prayer, study and by listening to and obeying the Holy Spirit's direction. And through the ages every mature apostle has had to do just as Paul did. There is no other way to gain such intimacy with Christ. As the apostle prays, learns, and listens to the Holy Spirit, he is able to do whatever he is directed to build up the church.

e. Signs and Wonders

In 2 Corinthians Paul identifies what could be called "apostolic signs." He wrote, "The things that mark an apostle-signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance." (12:12 NIV) Again, turning to Rengstorf, he says this of apostolic signs: "... the accompanying works are displays of Christ's power which validate the divine message as fact and not just theory. They are indispensable, not to the messengers, but to the

message."

From the above, and from human experience, we know that even today's apostles do have signs, wonders and miracles accompany their ministries from time to time. In my travels among the church in the developing nations I often hear of local apostles whose ministry is validated by miracles. I know an African apostle who was translated from one place to another. I know other African apostles who have raised the dead. Jesus is still in the business of validating His word through signs and wonders!

Apostles Need to Mature in Their Call and Ministry

The apostles we see throughout Scripture are men with extraordinary power and authority. But remember, no one is born that way. Nor are the apostles in Scripture infallible. Remember the occasion when Paul rebuked Peter for refusing to eat with Gentile Christians? (See Gal 2.) Indeed, as with every call and every gifting the Lord gives us, an apostle must mature in that call and gifting. And, like Peter, who made his share of mistakes, the apostle will make mistakes along the way. But that in no way diminishes his apostleship. The mature apostle is an extraordinary person who moves in great power in the church.

The mature apostle is and must be very versatile. Remember, his main call is to plant churches. Therefore, at least in the early stages of the newly planted church, the apostle must be able to fulfill all the offices and giftings needed in a church. He may, as the occasion arises, perform capably in any other of the five-fold ministry offices. He may evangelize, pastor, teach and on occasion fill the role of a prophet as did the apostle John when he received and wrote the Book of Revelation. He also may move in the gifts such as administration, helps, words of knowledge, words of wisdom, and so on.

In other words, the apostle must be able to do whatever is needed at the moment to plant and nurture a church body. This is the work of the apostle. It is foundational to the plans and purposes of God in these last days. God has called on His church to be His hands and feet. And the apostle is a mighty and integral part of those plans.

Part II will continue with the study on the works and the hardships of the apostle, apostles in the Bible, apostles since the Reformation, and apostles today.

1. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume I, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, Mich., pages 202 - 204.

2. NIV Bible Commentary, Volume 2: New Testament, Kenneth L. Barker & John Kohlenberger III Consulting Editors, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich. page 1141.

3. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Fredrich, editors, Abridged in One Volume by Geoffrey Bromiley, Copyright 1985 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., pages 70 - 74.

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