

# The Apostolic Role

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## BACKGROUND

Our understanding of what an apostle in New Testament times was has been based largely on what we know of Paul the apostle. Some argue that there is no place for apostles in the church today. Such a ministry, they say, ended many centuries ago, either in the first century or at least by the time the canon of Scripture was completed and recognised.

Others are a little more open-minded, but limit the current role of apostolic ministry to missionary work in areas of the world where the gospel has never been preached. The word 'missionary' comes from a Latin word meaning the same as the Greek word *apostolos*, 'one sent forth'.

In this document, we seek to clarify HCC's position on this subject. We believe that we require a full understanding of the ministry of the New Testament apostle, if we are to understand the New Testament leadership structure which we seek to follow.

## LOOKING BACK

It is clear from a reading of the Scriptures that apostles served six main functions:

### 1. Taking the gospel to unreached areas

Paul wrote to the Romans, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Romans 15:20).

### 2. Planting churches upon the foundation of Christ

Paul speaks of this important apostolic role in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11: "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

In some cases, apostolic ministry also included helping established churches return to their scriptural foundation (Galatians 1:6-10, 3:1-3; Revelation 2:1-5).

### **3. Appointing initial leaders and ongoing training/mentoring of leaders of a church**

When Paul and Barnabas made their second visit to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, they prayed, fasted and ordained leaders in each church (Acts 14:21-23). Paul likewise instructed his apostolic understudy, Titus, to “set in order” the churches in Crete and appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

### **4. Dealing with specific problems, false doctrines or sins**

Paul spoke with apostolic authority to the church he planted at Corinth about a number of problems that had developed there: disunity, immaturity, pride, immorality, taking other believers to court before secular authorities, questions about celibacy and marriage, disputes about meat offered to idols, improper handling of the Lord’s Supper, misuse of spiritual gifts, and confusion about the resurrection.

### **5. Promoting unity in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-16)**

The need for unity was addressed on many different levels. In Philippi, Paul had to deal with contention between two women in the local assembly, Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2). In Corinth, Paul challenged the church's citywide disunity, brought about when believers lost sight of the centrality of Christ and rallied around dynamic leaders such as himself, Apollos and Peter.

In addition to dealing with unity issues in local assemblies or in the church in a city, Paul also performed the apostolic role of networking the church around the world (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

### **6. Demonstrating and imparting the supernatural dimension of the kingdom of God**

Although it is God's intention for all believers to heal the sick, cast out demons and perform miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 16:17-20), apostolic ministers in particular are to bear this credential (2 Corinthians 12:12).

It is said that God did extraordinary miracles through Paul (Acts 19:11), implying the presence of supernatural manifestations greater than ‘ordinary’ miracles. And it is said that “with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). Not only did the apostles demonstrate the power of God, but they also imparted it in special ways to other believers (Acts 8:4-20, 10:44-46, 19:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:6-7).

In outlining these six general functions of apostles in the first-century church, we do not believe there is only one way of fulfilling the role. The apostolic role was carried out in quite unique ways by each of the apostles described in the New Testament:

- Peter was particularly gifted in reaching the lost.
- Paul seemed to excel in teaching and in building believers together as a functional expression of the body of Christ.
- John was an apostle with a prophetic heart. His passion was that God's people would walk righteously and in a love relationship, both with the Lord and each other.
- James, the half-brother of Jesus, also was recognised as an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:7), even though the focus of his ministry was apparently more pastoral and primarily localised in Jerusalem.

It is also important to realise that having an apostolic ministry did not automatically mean the apostle had the right to exercise full authority in all places and situations. It was a ministry based on relationship and not just on calling. Thus, Paul says to the Corinthians: "Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you" (1 Corinthians 9:1-2).

Paul had been instrumental in bringing the gospel to Corinth and laying the church's foundation there. Because of this, he claimed a special relationship with the Corinthians that enabled him to speak to them with a boldness that might not have been appropriate with the churches in Jerusalem or Rome, which had been established by others (1 Corinthians 4:14-21).

Also, it appears that the authority of an apostle did not disappear after the local church was firmly established and provided with the oversight of local leaders. Paul intervened without apology to resolve major problems not being remedied by the local leadership (as in Corinth), but at other times he seemed to assume the role of a father whose authority is modified after his son or daughter has reached adulthood.

It is crucial to note that Paul's heart was not to establish a chain of "we are of Paul" churches, but to see each church function under the headship of Christ (Colossians 1:18; Acts 20:32; 2 Corinthians 11:2-3).

## **WHAT ABOUT NOW?**

Some commentators state that after the apostle John died, the 'apostolic age' officially ended and there ceased to be any valid apostolic ministry. This view is based on two erroneous assumptions:

- That the role of apostle was limited to the original 12 apostles chosen by Jesus. A careful reading of the New Testament will show that additional leaders also are referred to as apostles, including Matthias, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Andronicus, Junias and Epaphroditus. The original 12 indeed are said to have a special role in God's purposes

(Revelation 21:14; Matthew 19:28), but that certainly does not mean that they were the only apostles.

- That there is no need for apostles today because everything has been accomplished. This objection can best be answered by looking again at the list of functions of an apostle. Are the functions still relevant today?

***Penetrating unreached areas:***

Although the gospel has gone out to some degree to every nation, there are still thousands of unreached people groups that, because of geographical or linguistic isolation, have never even heard of Jesus Christ.

***Church planting and foundation laying:***

God-gifted church planters are still desperately needed all over the world. In addition, many existing churches have been built on human traditions and opinions rather than on the solid biblical foundation that apostolic-hearted ministers long to provide.

***Appointing and training leaders:***

Today the apostolic function of training leaders has been largely replaced by seminaries and Bible schools. Appointing the leaders of local churches generally has become a matter of congregational voting, selection by a denominational hierarchy or the increasingly common practice of aspiring preachers to simply start their own churches and appoint themselves the pastors.

A result of this lack of apostolic involvement is that leaders often have been put in places of responsibility they are not gifted or adequately equipped to fulfill. They may have been good students at the seminary, but they are unlikely to receive the type of personal training and character development that Timothy received from Paul. As in the first century, there are countless tutors today, but the need in the church is for true spiritual fathers (1 Corinthians 4:14-17).

***Addressing unresolved problems:***

Almost every church occasionally encounters an impasse that is difficult to resolve without outside assistance. There is still a need today for ministers with apostolic authority who can provide accountability and pierce through blind spots, ignorance and pride, speaking the Word of God to areas of sin, imbalance, false doctrine and division.

***Promoting unity:***

The disunity of the body of Christ robs us of the full blessing of God and undermines our testimony to the lost. Ministers with a genuine apostolic heart are burdened for God's people to care for each other's needs as a united family and reach the world as a united army.

Local congregations frequently are deficient in seeing the 'big picture' of the church around the world and sensing the Lord's heartbeat that His body be functionally interlinked. This vision of unity is needed in the church today, and only those with apostolic insight and authority have the necessary gifts to bring it about in a significant way.

***Demonstrating and imparting the supernatural:***

We believe God is working to restore signs and wonders to the church. For too long we have relied on our intellect, human wisdom and persuasive words, the very things Paul refused to put his confidence in: "My message and my preaching were not in wise and persuasive words, but with demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4- 5).

We would be surprised if someone suggested that all pastors, teachers or evangelists had passed away and were no longer valid parts of the church. Nevertheless, we often have allowed ourselves to be robbed of the ministries of apostles and prophets, which are found in the same list of ministries in Ephesians 4:11.

***The church without apostles is like a car without all of its cylinders functioning: it may still move, but it is likely to sputter and lack the power it is supposed to have:***

We need more people functioning with apostolic and prophetic impact and fewer people worrying about who has the title or whether it is still valid today. Despite the reservations and questions of some people, God is undoubtedly raising up apostles to serve the church and if we are wise we will recognise our need for such input.

## **CONCLUSION**

Beyond simply being sent, the apostle's role, in broad terms, is outlined in Scripture as: to prepare God's people for ministry, and to build up the body of Christ.

Specifically, the apostle is a pioneer and a foundation builder. He/she is the one who breaks new ground, both in the natural by pioneering new works and breaking open new territories and in the spiritual by leading God's people to new places in God. The apostle cannot be content to sit where it is comfortable, either in the natural or in the spirit. There is always a 'beyond' that needs to be pressed into and taken for God. There is always a new 'promised land' with its own particular giants waiting to be brought into submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle is one who builds up. Ideally, he/she works with the prophet, whose job it is to tear down everything that exalts itself against God. The apostle then clears the rubble and lays the foundations of truth. The apostle also builds individuals, establishing truth in their life, establishing them in sound relationships within the Body of Christ, encouraging them to take up the thing to which God has called them, and mentoring, training and releasing them in the ministry.

The ministry of the apostle is marked with a high level of authority. Firstly in the spirit realm, the apostle must come to a place where he/she understands the authority which he/she has been given in Christ, not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of owning it. As a front-line general in the army of God, the apostle will be challenged and opposed not only by low-level demons and spiritual forces, but by principalities and powers. He/she needs to know how to stand against these and to command their submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the natural the apostle also has authority in the Body of Christ, particularly in relation to those who come under his/her covering. However, this authority is not something to be forced but something which is freely recognised and accepted by those who come under it. In fact, this recognition and acceptance of his/her authority is one of the marks of a true apostle.

## **HOW DOES THIS WORK PRACTICALLY IN RELATION TO HCC?**

- **Appointing initial leaders and ongoing training/mentoring of leaders of a church**

Obviously HCC is no longer in a situation where initial leaders are being appointed and so this does not apply. However when a new leader is appointed to lead HCC, we would expect the Apostolic to play a role, advising the Elders and being involved in the final selection process.

Once a new leader is in place, we would expect the Apostolic to support, help train and mentor that leader. In the early stages of a new leader's tenure, this would happen on a very regular basis, whereas over time, as a new leader grows in experience, the frequency would lessen.

The Apostolic would also be expected to fulfill the same role when a new Elder is appointed.

- **Addressing unresolved problems**

Every church occasionally encounters problems which cannot be resolved internally. In these instances it will be right to include the Apostolic so we might gain a broader perspective, as well as experience of how other churches have addressed similar situations.

Likewise, where a difference of opinion or an inability to gain consensus on a matter emerges among the elements of the Senior Leadership team, we will expect the Apostolic to become involved to help bring a resolution.

The Apostolic will also have the freedom to bring correction where there is evidence of a HCC falling into error/heresy.

- **Promoting unity**

We expect the Apostolic to keep HCC in touch with the "big picture" of the church around the world and, sensing the Lord's heartbeat, ensuring that HCC remains functionally interlinked. Likewise, the Apostolic will be invited to preach and teach in HCC on a regular basis.

- **Demonstrating and imparting the supernatural.**

The Apostolic will act as an example first to the Senior Leader and Elders and then to the wider body of HCC in demonstrating and imparting the supernatural, bringing challenge and encouragement as appropriate.

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