

ARE THERE MODERN-DAY APOSTLES?

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Two Word Meanings

Christians sometimes ask whether there are apostles in the church today. To answer the question, we must clarify what it means because the New Testament uses *apostle* in more than one way. Its general sense refers to someone who is “sent,” which makes it a synonym for missionary. In its technical usage, *apostle* refers to a group of men, fourteen in number, who had additional specialized qualifications: they were direct witnesses of the resurrected Christ (except for Judas Iscariot), directly chosen and commissioned by Christ, directly endowed with their message, directly guided in their work, and directly empowered by the Spirit. (See “Paul as Primary Apostle.”). “*You tried the ones that call themselves apostles and aren’t*” (Revelation 2:2) implies that some apostles were distinguishable from other apostles. If all apostles were simply traveling evangelists or insightful men differing only in degree, they could be called apostles. Denying the claim would be like denying that someone was a missionary. They were in fact traveling, they were in fact insightful if they were, and they were in fact sent from somewhere.

So the question about modern “apostles” can be answered “yes” or “no,” depending on the meaning of the word. If the question is about apostles in the technical sense, then for reasons given below we answer “no.” If the question is simply about apostles in the general sense of “sent ones,” we can answer “yes.”

There is another way in which we can answer “yes” about apostles today: we have the same apostles today that they had in the first century. The New Testament is their witness in written form because it came from the apostles themselves and from men that served as extensions of their office—men who worked and wrote under the apostles' direction. They wrote the New Testament to preserve and multiply the apostolic testimony, as 2 Peter says, “*As long as I am in this tabernacle, I think it’s right to stir you up by putting you in remembrance, knowing that the putting off of my tabernacle comes soon . . . that at every time after my decease you can call these things to mind*” (1:13-15; cp. 3:1-2).

Reasons for Caution

Usually, people that ask about apostles today are thinking of *apostle* in the primary sense, and they ask because they have encountered someone that claims to be one. We would do well to be cautious even if we lived in the first century, because there were false apostles even then (2 Corinthians 11:13; Revelation 2:2). If there was no question about the existence of apostles, prophets, miraculous manifestation, and the like, we would still need to apply the tests discussed below (See also *Gifts of the Spirit: Supplementary Notes*, pp. 43-47 + 48-58).

We also do well to exercise a healthy skepticism since the New Testament gives no reason for believing that the original apostles had successors in the Christian era any more than Moses did in the Mosaic period. Moses and the apostles served as God’s normative spokesmen in their respective dispensations (Deuteronomy 18:15-22; Galatians 1:8-9; Romans 16:17; 2 Peter 1:15-3:18).

We have significant reasons against supposing the existence of subsequent apostles. These reasons apply differently whether we are dealing with the Roman Catholic sense of apostolic succession—like kingship—or with something like Old Testament judges or prophets, whom God raised up individually as needed.

First, we note that (a) even in the Mosaic period there was not always a prophet among the Israelites, notably during the four-hundred-year period between Malachi and John the Baptist. During those times, the nation could surely have benefited from special divine guidance. Even when there were prophets, they were not available everywhere in the nation.

(b) When Herod executed James the brother of John, no successor was appointed (Acts 12:1ff.) as there was when Judas vacated his office (Acts 1:15-25).

(c) Scripture speaks of twelve apostles for all time. Jesus said the Twelve would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). Even in Revelation after the church age, there are twelve apostles, not hundreds (21:14).

Furthermore, (d) an eyewitness cannot have a successor, and giving eyewitness testimony to Christ's resurrection was a distinctive function of the apostles (Acts 1:6-8; 1:21ff.; 2:32; 4:33 ["their witness"], 10:39-43; 26:15-16; 1 Corinthians 9:1?).

Testing Apostolic Claimants

Since there are reasons to be skeptical about apostolic claims, we must try "*the ones that call themselves apostles and aren't*" (Revelation 2:2; cp. 2 Corinthians 11:13). For one thing, Paul alludes to "*the signs of an apostle*" (2 Corinthians 12:12), presumably referring to miraculous confirmation of his apostleship. Genuine miracle corresponds with new revelation because new revelation is not necessarily subject to the doctrinal test, the test for whether supposed revelation harmonizes with previous revelation (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Mark 2:5-10; Galatians 1:8-9). Additionally, apostles have to meet the moral test (Mark 9:39; John 9:16, 31) and the test of whether their activities glorify God and benefit others rather than draw attention to themselves (Matthew 4:5-7 = Luke 4:9-12) or benefit themselves (cp. Acts 16:16-18; 1 Corinthians 13-14 [love and edification of others]; Matthew 4:3-4 = Luke 3:4-5). Since someone might meet these tests without being a primary apostle, we expect miraculous confirmation of apostles. And the miraculous confirmation needs to meet the test of uniform "success" (Deuteronomy 18:20-22; John 3:34?; Acts 19:13-17), etc. Succeeding occasionally at doing something surprising does not constitute miraculous manifestation. God does not miraculously confirm the claims of those who do not truthfully represent him.

The crux of the issue is whether someone is supernaturally aided in a knowable and provable way—knowable to himself and provable to other Christians. We say "knowable to himself" because a genuine apostle has to distinguish between revelation from the Lord and wisdom of application from himself (1 Corinthians 7). We say "provable to others" because other people cannot evaluate a private experience or strong sense of someone's certainty about something. In biblical accounts, objective authentication associates with the ones that God specially leads.

Reasons for Apostolic Claims

Claiming apostleship may happen today for several reasons. (1) Someone may be trying to avoid having to justify his doctrinal pronouncements, authenticate his new revelations, prove

his predictions, or lend credence to his interpretations. Although he should be satisfied with basing his message on biblical authority, he may appeal to apostleship to avoid leaving himself open to objections from others who understand scripture differently. Having apostolic status would eliminate discussion.

A person may want to be considered an apostle because (2) he wants to claim the ability to pass on supernatural gifts. The most relevant test is whether he is actually passing on anything supernatural, anything relevant to Christian concerns, anything subject to investigation. This test amounts to the definitional test, the test of whether something bears the marks it had in the New Testament. There is no point to “hyping” psychological phenomena into supernatural gifts or saying that nothing happened because the recipient lacked faith or genuine expectation; everyone is deficient in faith to some degree. Curious phenomena like “the Toronto blessing,” “being slain in the spirit,” uttering meaningless sounds, achieving altered states of consciousness, or displaying pointless demonstrations, which have nothing to do with the concerns of the Christian faith. These occurrences are more likely psychological phenomena than anything specifically religious, much less Christian. All gifts are given for the benefit of ministry to others (1 Corinthians 12:7; cp. Matthew 4:3-4; 2 Corinthians 12:12); so if it is something that simply gives the person himself or someone else an “experience,” it is not “the genuine article” or it is being misused.

Perhaps, (3) the person wants authority to direct affairs beyond the local church. Besides lordship and apostleship, there is no New Testament office that is both general and authoritative. The elders have supervisory authority, but only within the local church. So false apostles can focus attention on apostleship. Claiming general authority is a serious matter because, if it is true, it obligates other Christians to obey his directives or follow anybody he appoints.

Claiming apostleship may simply (4) indicate a desire for profile that enhances someone's sense of importance. Everyone needs to understand that being called into ministry of any kind has nothing to do with “stroking egos.” It calls not to self-enhancement, but suffering, rejection, and worse. Ministry in any of its forms is no place for immature people to find a basis for self-esteem through recognition.

Why No Apostles Now?

If the question is why there are no apostles today, we can say we do not have to have them. We can say that (1) we have the same ones they had in the beginning. To play on the words of Jesus to the rich man, “*They have the apostles; let them read them*” (Luke 16:29). Apostleship in the New Testament is like lawgiver in the Old Testament. Just because an office existed originally does not mean it needed to have successors. After Moses there were judges and prophets that guided the nation by applying the Mosaic revelation to current circumstances; and we can imagine that God could establish a like system in our dispensation. But (2) there is a difference between what would be useful and what is necessary. It would be useful to have God tell us face to face where we should minister or what business ventures to undertake to his glory so we would not waste kingdom resources; but he is evidently not given to micromanagement. (3) We may glorify him more by operating by his principles than by having him tell us every move to make. We may observe as well that having court prophets did not keep Israel on course religiously. Besides, (4) not having apostles or prophets does not leave us without ongoing guidance; everything available through manifest miracle is available through answered prayer. (5) God's intervention in the form of providence is sufficient. Finally, (6) in the judgment, God

can make allowance for our good-faith mistakes in applying apostolic principles to new circumstances outside of Bible times and places.

A Lower View of Apostleship

The cases above involve people who may be “hyping” natural things into supernatural ones and associating them with apostleship. A nearly opposite scheme reduces apostolic phenomena to something near to normal human experience. Under this view, early Christian leaders were not protected from error even in their doctrinal leadership. They were wise, articulate, zealous men guided, not by propositional revelation, but by a generally correct conceptual orientation. God supposedly reveals, not through propositions, but through events whose meaning such men incisively interpreted.

When biblical “inspiration” becomes comparable to intuitive creativity, it differs only in degree, not in kind, from what modern leaders can do—a view called dynamic inspiration. This low view of scripture brings its authors down to the level of men like Francis Schaeffer, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, F. F. Bruce, Karl Barth. That attitude toward them does not take seriously the claims of biblical writers for themselves, including the ability to differentiate special guidance (revelation) from personal insight (advice), as in 1 Corinthians 7. Other texts make explicit claims to special conceptual inspiration: Galatians 1:11-12; 1 Peter 1:12, *etc.* Not only have modern “apostles” not received special propositional revelation; they have not even been witnesses of special divine interventions such as the gospels and The Acts record and such as Peter refers to in his second letter (1:15-21; cp. 2 Corinthians 12:1-7). There is no way to reduce these men's claims to creative intuition without doing violence to the evident meaning of their claims.

In conclusion, we encourage people to evaluate the lack of evidence for apostles in the technical sense as recurring leaders present in the church, to observe the reasons against expecting such leaders, and to test any who claim that responsibility and privilege. By all means, we must distinguish helpful interpreters of Christian truth from those whom Christ himself chose, specially endowed, directly sent and guided, and who could directly serve as eyewitnesses of the cornerstone of all Christian apologetics: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.