

ADDED NOTATIONS ON APOSTLES TODAY

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We may question whether Judas should be counted among the men called apostles in the primary sense. Although he originally had that role, he left it (cp. Acts 1:15-22).. In addition, he did not see the resurrected Christ receive the commission and enablements distinctive to apostles in the primary sense. With Judas omitted, that leaves thirteen apostles with Matthias replacing Judas and Paul joining the class later.

We might suppose that all the offices should exist today that existed in the first century. Though the idea makes sense, it is not self-evident; and the information we have does not bear it out. By comparison, supernatural prophets did not exist in Israel at every period of its history. For the last four hundred years of the Mosaic dispensation, God sent the nation no prophets. That is nearly twice as long as America has been a nation! There may be less need for prophets throughout the church age because the final revelation through Christ has taken place. Besides, there is no national component now to the people of God, a factor that previously called for court prophets to advise the king on national affairs. We could imagine a helpful role for members of the church today or as well as during those last four hundred years before Christ, but that is not the issue. The issue is whether God decides it is sufficiently necessary to fill that role.

Beyond that, it does no good to suppose that the apostolic or prophet office should be functioning. If no one has the marks of an apostle or prophet, insisting that there should be does not change anything—as if not having a prophet indicated a defect in someone’s dedication to God, as if it were someone’s choice to start practicing supernatural gifts, receiving revelation, or passing on supernatural gifts. We cannot be if we cannot do, and we can’t use what we don’t have.

Even if supernaturally gifted persons exist in the body of Christ today, that does not solve the question about specific cases. Each claim must be vetted. “Talk is cheap.” Likewise, claims are easy, claims like receiving revelations that cannot be checked, giving predictions too future to verify, offering “gifts” like “compassion” or “knowledge” that we do not know how to identify anyway, gifts we could not distinguish from good advice from wise Christians, forgiving someone’s sins, *etc.* That is why Jesus provided something more tangible to verify his claim to forgive sins on earth: “*Get up and walk*” (Mark 2:9-11).

Furthermore, the word *prophet* in New Testament usage may not refer to someone supernaturally gifted. It may indicate an exhorter, someone good at encouraging people. In Acts 15:32, after recording the decision to send a letter to the Gentile churches, the text says that Judas and Silas went along to Antioch. They, “*being themselves also prophets, exhorted the brethren.*” There are people like that today who have no supernatural gift; but they are good pulpiteers, good speakers that can “move” an audience to greater service and dedicated living. Without overdoing the comparison, we might call them “motivational speakers.” This idea goes beyond the prophetic office as supernaturally endowed.

The idea that technical apostles exist in the church today is true in an important way. They are the same ones the church had in the first century. The situation is comparable to “lawgiver” in the Old Testament era. At, say, 200 B. C. there was a lawgiver in Israel—Moses. Likewise, there are apostles in the church—the original Twelve. We have the same apostles as

we have the same Lord. As the Pentateuch became the equivalent of Moses after he died, so the New Testament has been the equivalent of the apostles since their passing.

This question about modern apostles may involve supernaturalizing what can have a natural basis. Taking it as a natural operation does not detract from its excellence or from God's involvement in the world today. The tendency to supernaturalize represents a pendulum effect where God does not involve himself in his creation (deism). It is a question which extreme can do more harm in the life and ministry of the church—over-supernaturalizing or de-supernaturalizing.

We may ask whether *apostle* in Ephesians 4:11 is a general or technical term. Chapter III of my M. A. thesis from Wheaton College offers an analysis of New Testament church organization [The New Testament Basis for the Non-Denominational Church: The Historical Argument]. Under the entry for “evangelist” appears the evidence for saying that *apostle* in the general sense equals “evangelist.” If that evidence is satisfactory, then Ephesians 4:11 uses *apostle* in a technical sense, because *evangelist* appears in the same list. (See the document “The New Testament Structure of the Church.”)

A further question is how to understand “missionaries” in the modern sense. Based on the thesis information, “missionary” equals “apostle” in the general sense, that is, “evangelist.” The words use the same word picture—someone “sent”; *apostle* and *missionary* derive from Greek and Latin respectively. In current usage, “missionary” applies to cross-cultural settings and “evangelist” to someone working in his own culture. But that refinement does not affect the nature of the function.

The thesis information accords well with the idea that *minister* in modern usage also falls under the category of evangelist in New Testament usage. A minister holds a general office in that he goes from place to place as what he is. How long he stays in any one place is not the point. He may stay somewhere longer than some men are elders there. On the other hand, because of a mobile occupation, an elder may move more often than a minister does, but the elder does not go from place to place as an elder. After serving a while in each place, he may be appointed as an elder; but each time he is chosen from among the local constituency. Some ministers, after staying for some time working with a given congregation, have been installed as one of the elders. Under those conditions he becomes one worthy of what the New Testament calls “*double honor*,” that is, he is a paid elder. But he does not have any more supervisory authority as an elder than any other elder in the congregation (though he may have more influence, respect, natural vs. formal leadership, *etc.*). If he then leaves for another congregation, he arrives at the next congregation as a minister, not as an elder. Some have suggested the concept of “hired servant” as a category for the minister, which is conceivable; but the evangelist classification seems appropriate, not only for today’s evangelist and missionary, but for minister as well.

Apostles head the list in Ephesians 4, which suggests to some interpreters that apostles are over the others whose roles follow in the list. Apostles do have authority over the others, but they do so as apostles in the technical, not general here. The reason readers know that apostles have authority over the rest is not that they appear ahead of the rest, but that their description elsewhere includes leadership over the rest of the offices. [*Hermeneutics: Getting the Point* gives the information for avoiding the over-interpretation that occurs so often with lists; see pp. 102-4].

Interpreters argue similarly from the Ephesians 4 list that evangelists are over the local elders because evangelists appear ahead of them. But we cannot even tell whether Paul had in mind an intended order, much less what that order was. It puts too much weight on the sequence of terms to say that these offices are in descending order of importance or authority. As far as sequence is concerned, it is more likely that Paul puts the general offices ahead of the local ones and the supernatural offices ahead of the natural ones. [For supporting evidence, see again my M.A. thesis *The New Testament Basis for the Non-Denominational Church.*] That suggestion comes, not from the order in the list, but from knowing how those offices operated in the New Testament records.

As for Ananais' imposition of hands on Paul, we should remember that laying on hands was a formal gesture used three different circumstances: (a) appointment to an office, (b) healing someone, and (c) bestowing a miraculous gift. Besides these usages, "lay hands on" could refer to (d) seizing someone in an attack or a formal arrest, and (e) blessing someone. The last of these is something like putting a hand on someone's shoulder or on a kid's head to express appreciation, love, well-wishing; the gesture communicates something seriously meant. There is no reason to think that by this gesture Ananias was appointing Paul to the apostleship or passing on spiritual gifts to him. At most, he was healing Paul from his blindness with this gesture. He may have put his hand on Paul's shoulder to make clearer contact with his blind hearer.

"*Being filled with the Spirit*" in Acts 9:17 is not clear from the immediate context. New Testament usage does not connect "*being filled with the Spirit*" with receiving miraculous gifts. It indicates a surge of boldness to do something or of inspiration to speak. The text does not even say that the filling was associated with the laying on of Ananias' hands. When he laid his hands on Paul, Ananias told him that the Lord had sent him so Paul might receive sight and be filled with the Spirit. The filling could as easily connect with finalizing Paul's conversion, which was what Ananias did with Paul (cp. Acts 2:38-39). The immediate context says that at his word Paul was baptized. Receiving the Spirit at conversion is all that needs to be happening here. Nothing miraculous is evident, and no connection between filling and the laying on of hands is required.

Apostle in the primary sense involved being directly chosen and directly commissioned by the Lord himself. Paul's appointment was by Christ himself if he was indeed an apostle in the primary sense. Acts 26 sounds as if his calling and appointment had occurred before Paul ever got to Damascus. Paul says that he "*was not disobedient to that heavenly vision*" (19). In 26:16-18, Jesus appeared to him to appoint him a minister (direct appointment) and a witness (of the resurrection) and of what Christ would show him later (direct revelation).

There is no word on when Paul's gifting began to express itself, so it is a moot point. Paul's first recorded miracle was striking Elymas blind on Crete during the first missionary journey (Acts 13:8-12). That event occurred after his three years in Arabia (Galatians 1:17), after a stay in Tarsus (Galatians 1:21), after Barnabas brought him from Tarsus to Antioch (Acts 9:30), and after Paul had ministered in Antioch for a while (Acts 13:1-3). That amounts to several years after meeting Ananias. It would be easier to argue that Paul's miraculous gifting came from the laying on of the hands of the Antioch elders (Acts 13:1-3), but there is no way to be sure that their imposition of hands was more than a gesture of Godspeed in the work to which the Holy Spirit had called him and Barnabas.