

What is the difference between a disciple and apostle?

Every apostle was a disciple, but not every disciple was an apostle. Every person who believes in Jesus is called His disciple. Matthew 28:19-20 records Jesus saying, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The Greek word for “disciple” simply refers to a learner and is used throughout the New Testament to refer to people who believed in Jesus and followed Him (Luke 14:26-33). For example, Acts 6:1 says, “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing.” The word disciples simply means “believers” or “Christians” in this context.

The Greek word for “apostle” literally means “one who is sent” and can refer to an emissary or anyone sent on a mission. An apostle is given the authority of the one who sent him. All of the apostles were disciples—they were among the many believers in Jesus—but only a select group of disciples were chosen as the Twelve Apostles (Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:14; Acts 26:14-18). This included the original twelve disciples (although Judas Iscariot eventually reversed his loyalties and rejected Christ) and either Paul or Matthias. That there is a select group of twelve apostles is seen in the foundations of the walls of the New Jerusalem: twelve foundations, each inscribed with a name of an apostle (Revelation 21:14).

Other men who are named “apostles” in the New Testament—although not members of the Twelve—include Matthias (Acts 1:26), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6-9), Timothy and Silas (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25),

and two unnamed apostles (2 Corinthians 8:23, possibly already included in the previous list). These men were “sent ones” in that they were chosen for specific work on behalf of the church, but they were not part of the Twelve who were hand-picked by Jesus. Jesus is also called an “apostle” in Hebrews 3:1, indicating that He was sent by and had the authority of His Father.

Ephesians 4:11-16 speaks of apostles along with other church leaders whose role was to equip the believers for works of service. The main distinction of apostles appears to have been regarding their authority. The apostles’ teaching forms the foundation for the truths of our faith (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 2:20). The qualifications for being an apostle included having been with Christ during His ministry, having personally witnessed Jesus after His resurrection, and having been empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform miracles or signs (Acts 1:21-22; 10:41; 2 Corinthians 12:12). Paul was an exception to part of the qualifications. Although he did not accompany Jesus on His earthly journeys, Jesus made a special appearance to him on the road to Damascus and set him apart as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 26:14-18). This is why Paul compared his place among the other apostles as “one born at the wrong time” (1 Corinthians 15:8, NET).

There are no apostles, in the special sense of the word, alive in this world today. There were only twelve, and they had a special task in the founding of the church. The word apostle, however, is still used by some Christian groups in reference to a missionary or entrepreneurial leader in a general sense. But these people do not meet the same qualifications as the twelve apostles in the Bible.

In summary, every person who believes in Jesus as his or her Savior is a disciple of Jesus. However, only a select group of early believers were chosen as apostles and given

authority to perform signs and share the revelations found in the New Testament.