

## **Apostolic in Doctrine**

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### **Introduction**

Truth does not change, but the questions earnest Christians ask do change through the years. Periodically, accepted traditional understandings are called into question and require a fresh assessment. Essentially this is what transpired at the beginning of the twentieth century with the arrival of the Pentecostal awakening. The early Pentecostals challenged the commonly accepted “cessationist” theology that dominated evangelical Christianity. They resisted the attempt of fundamentalist Protestantism to confine the supernatural work of God to the Apostolic Age. They insisted that, in an important sense, the work of the Holy Spirit described in the Book of Acts was intended to be the model by which the vitality of the church should be measured in today’s world.

The early Pentecostals’ strong stance has led to the recognition by much of the contemporary church world, howbeit reluctantly, that the church must make a greater place for the supernatural dimension of Christianity, including charismatic gifts and ministries.<sup>1</sup> The rapidly changing demographics of the church disclose that charismatically oriented Christian groups are among the fastest-growing segments of the church today. As a result, older, traditional churches must acknowledge that the

churches of the future will be inclined to be apostolic in character.<sup>2</sup>

The first battle seems to be largely over. Much of the church has capitulated to the principle of the importance of charismatic ministry. Perhaps pragmatic considerations have forced the traditional church world into making grudging allowance for such practices and ministry. However, the very success of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has occasioned fresh questions that require thoughtful reflection.

At the beginning of the modern Pentecostal revival, the term “apostolic” was frequently employed, both in the titles of emerging denominations and in the titles of periodicals. This term was intended to support the concept that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on modern-day people, empowering them in much the same fashion as the writers of the New Testament described in the life of the Early Church. The term “apostolic” was an announcement that, indeed, the age of miracles was not past. All believers were candidates for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Gifts of the Spirit were to be expected among all of God’s people. The early shape of the debate was “either-or.” You accepted the principle of the availability of New Testament experiences of the Spirit or you did not. The questions centered on

personal spiritual experience. The structure of the church was not in serious debate, as long as the existing structures made an adequate place for manifestations of the Spirit and the recognition of gifted ministries. Existing church structures were readily borrowed, usually from the Methodist or Baptist traditions.

The current debate has now moved toward a reexamination of church structures as the context in which apostolic ministry is to be developed. In the last decade, Pentecostals and charismatics have been confronted with issues that did not require examination in the earlier years of the revival. However, traditional Pentecostals are now contemplating the emergence of a “restorationist” movement that claims to revive the offices of apostle and prophet. Earlier Pentecostals had largely dismissed this concept, preferring to describe gifted ministries as “functions” rather than conferring titles, or “offices” on significant leaders. The “New Order of the Latter Rain” of the 1940s, which essentially called into being such offices, was summarily dealt with by Pentecostal bodies, such as the Assemblies of God,<sup>3</sup> and this movement quickly disappeared from the radar screen. Today, the issue is no longer limited to the eddies and backwaters, but is now making a strong appearance within the ranks of Pentecostals. For example, the Australian Assemblies of God, as a national movement, has restructured itself in a dramatically new way, assigning to the denominational leadership the kind of authority and responsibility associated with the first-century apostles.<sup>4</sup> How are we to address this issue from a biblical perspective?

I propose that we consider first the context in which apostolic ministry took place. This calls for an examination of church structure as presented in the New Testament writings. Subsequently, I propose that we examine the biblical principles related specifically to the role of the apostle. Not all relevant issues can be addressed in a single paper.

Therefore, I am narrowing my focus to a study of apostles and their place in the Early Church. From this inquiry, I trust that some useful guidelines for contemporary ministry may be elicited.

### **The Context of Apostolic Ministry: Early Church Structure**

The Church was instituted by Christ (Mt. 16:18). Many consider the birth of the Church to be dated from the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the waiting disciples gathered in the Jerusalem Upper Room (Acts 2). At once, the original gathering of Christian believers began to take on a distinctive character. It became a visible, tangible expression of God’s presence in the world, centering in the risen Christ. Some of the characteristics of the Jerusalem church, based primarily on an examination of Acts 2:42-47, may be summarized:

*Teaching based on the apostolic norm.* The Jerusalem church measured its life, belief and practice by the teaching of the original apostles (Acts 2:42).

*The manifest presence of God.* The Jerusalem church was deeply conscious of God’s supernatural presence among them (see Acts 2:43: “they were filled with awe”). In the earlier years of the modern Pentecostal revival, the term often employed to capture this sense of God’s mighty presence was “reality.” A

sense of wonderment, of the *mysterium tremendum*, has been a hallmark of the earliest apostolic community and of Pentecostal fellowships in recent history. Believers came to Pentecostal gatherings because they expected that God would intervene in fresh ways. Minimal programming was needed.

*Supernatural miracles.* “Signs and wonders” were done through the ministry of the apostles (Acts 2:43). At the outset, the flow of supernatural interventions that marked the life of the Jerusalem church was mediated through the ministry of the recognized leaders, the original apostles. It should be noted, however, that later in the Book of Acts, supernatural events transpired through others besides the apostles. Note the story of Stephen, a lay person in the Jerusalem church, chosen to fill a role reminiscent of the deacons Paul identified in 1 Timothy 3:8-10. Stephen, clearly not an apostle, nonetheless is described as being used by God to perform signs and wonders (Acts 6:8). Ultimately, of course, Paul declared that the full range of charismatic ministries is available to all in the congregation, without regard to office or position (1 Cor. 12:7-11). The only qualifier is that it is the sovereign Lord who distributes manifestations as he chooses!

*Fellowship and compassion.* The believers gathered regularly and, evidently, frequently. It appears they readily adopted the structure and some of the functions of the synagogue. An eldership emerged. Leadership from within the congregation was identified and recognized. Paul acknowledges this clearly in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Both the term “elder” (*presbuteros*) and “overseer” (*episkopos*), which by the second century had evolved into separate

levels of ecclesiastical authority, were interchangeable as late as the decade of the 60s, when Acts likely was written (see Acts 20:17, 28). Titus 1:5-7 uses these terms interchangeably, as well.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that God employed a variety of instruments for spiritual leadership, clearly far beyond a limited apostolic circle. A key word for the early Jerusalem church is “community.”

### **Emerging Patterns of Church Structure**

Two passages in Acts offer helpful insights into the changing form of the earliest Palestinian church communities. In Acts 13:1-3, it is apparent that the leadership of the Antioch church was comprised of two types of ministry; what one might call the “didactic” and the “charismatic.” The terms “prophets and teachers” (*proph\_tai kai didaskaloi*) distinguish between the objective and the subjective, between the ministry of explaining the received teaching of the church body, which requires study and preparation, and the spontaneous exercise of the “unstudied,” of “immediacy,” of charismatic gifts.<sup>6</sup> It appears, then, that in the decade of the 40s, an attempt was made, at least in Antioch, to maintain a balance between formal structure and spontaneous charismatic ministry. It is noteworthy that this brief glimpse into church life at Antioch provides us with a profile of the functions of that church body as well. This profile seems to capture the purposes for which the local church existed.

Acts 13:1 supplies an important suggestion for the reason these folks gathered to have “church.” The object of the ministry of the prophets and teachers clearly was intended to edify the

gathered believers. It was a *ministry to the body*. The function of prophets and teachers is to edify the body of believers.

Acts 13:2 pictures the Antioch believers worshipping together. The Antioch church was not only about edification of believers, it was about *ministry to the Lord*. It was about deepening the relationship between believers and their risen Lord. The Antioch church was more than a school.

Acts 13:3 carries the purpose of the gathered body one step further. Into this Spirit-energized atmosphere, God gave directions for service, for their place in a larger setting than their own fellowship. This was to be *ministry to the world*. The Antioch church, agreeing that the prophetic utterance given in their midst was valid, commissioned Barnabas and Saul to be their ambassadors to the world beyond. It is important to recognize that from the beginning the Apostolic Church was a missionary community. Note that when the church had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and “sent them off” (*apelusan*). In effect, Barnabas and Saul were commissioned to be the “apostles,” the “sent ones” from the church at Antioch. We will return to this point later.

Another passage in Acts that helps us to capture the self-understanding of the Early Church regarding its form is the story of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The Antioch missionaries, Paul (as he is now called) and Barnabas, had been appointed, along with other believers, to go to Jerusalem to see the “apostles and elders” (*apostolous kai presbuterous*). Throughout the narrative that follows, it is evident that the leadership of the council was comprised of both apostles

and elders. It is important to notice that the moderator of the meeting appears to be James, not Peter. Further, when the council had acted, it was the apostles and elders, *with the whole church*, who decided how to communicate the results of the council (Acts 15:22). It seems clear that the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem church did not act apart from the consensus of the local body. This speaks to the principle of *accountability*.

Paul’s pastoral epistles offer further insights into the structure of first-century churches. If one compares the list of qualifications for elders in Titus 1:5-9 with the list Paul provides in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the observer will note that the list in Titus is briefer and more general. One is tempted to conjecture that the reason for this is that Titus’s assignment to “straighten out what was left unfinished” (Titus 1:5) addressed a difficult pioneer situation on Crete. Titus, the missionary Paul assigned to complete the establishment of the church there, was given explicit instructions to first “appoint elders in every town.” Evidently, in the earliest stages of planting a new church, it was necessary for an outsider—one with apostolic credentials, a missionary—to assume direction.

The situation in Ephesus was quite different. Paul, writing to his younger colleague Timothy, admonished him in his role as Paul’s representative to the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus was not new. It evidently had fallen into disorder and required outside missionary direction to recover its spiritual center. One of the assignments given to Timothy was to teach the people how to select proper leadership. In 1 Timothy 3:1, the wording indicates

that the people were involved in some way in the selection of their leaders: “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” It is not likely that Timothy made such appointments. The people, probably with Timothy’s approval, were authorized to select leaders from among themselves. Further, the list of qualifications for elders Paul supplied Timothy is more detailed and demanding than the list found in Titus.

Some assumptions may be made from this data. First, overt outside control is required in a pioneer church-planting setting. In such cases, the missionary selects the local leadership, seeking the best people he can identify, even if they do not have all the desirable qualifications that may come later. In a more developed church, such as that in Ephesus, the church seems to be given more input into selecting their leadership. The more elaborate listing of qualifications suggests that, at some point, a church can expect higher standards for leadership. What can one say to this? It appears that there is a marked latitude admissible in local church management processes. However, the direction of local church governance appears to move from an episcopal form toward a congregational form, as the church develops.

It is important to note that all the local churches, whether pioneering ventures or more established centers, functioned under apostolic authority. We will examine what this means in due course.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians provides another important dimension of spiritual leadership. His teaching on the local church gathered for worship (1 Cor. 11-14) emphasizes the importance

of each individual member. In a Pentecostal church, *all* are invited to participate! To each the sovereign Spirit may distribute manifestations of various kinds for the edification of the Body. The *laity* are an important part of the ministry equation. God may call upon any receptive instrument for edifying the body on a given occasion. Although there is a ranking of ministries, including apostles and prophets at the top of the list (1 Cor. 12:27-31), the ministry of prophecy does not appear to be limited to a recognized class of people called prophets. Paul exhorts, “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (1 Cor. 14:29) and then, “You can all prophesy in turn...” (1 Cor. 14:31). It looks very much like the people of God are invited to judge the worth of such prophetic utterances.

I would suggest that this “judging” was predicated on two criteria. First, any prophetic utterance was expected to conform to the revealed apostolic message. Note Paul’s strong challenge to the Galatian Christians on this very point (Gal. 1: 6-9). Second, since the “spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets,” one could disrupt a meeting with a poorly timed utterance or an utterance that might appear to the rest to be contrary in tone or content to the “flow” of the meeting. (Early Pentecostals frequently spoke of the “tenor” of a meeting to capture this.)

Ephesians 4:11 is the centerpiece of discussion for the issue of “restorationism.” The “fivefold ministry” is found here. Christ gave gifts to the Church: some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. These are leadership gifts—people called by the

Lord to serve the body of Christ in particular ways. The two verses that follow are important for putting these leadership gifts into proper perspective. Ephesians 4:12 tells us that these giftings of leadership have a specific purpose: “to equip” (*pros ton katartismon*) the people of God for “works of service” (*eis ergon diakonias*). The role of such leadership is best seen as empowering the people of God to do ministry. Leadership has a supportive, not a coercive or controlling, role. It is clear that the objective of effective ministry in the church is for the building up of the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:13 provides indices by which one can measure whether edification is transpiring. The first category identified is in the *cognitive* domain: aiding believers to come to unity in “the faith,” that objective body of Christian teaching presented by the apostles. The way this is expressed indicates that this is a journey, not necessarily a destination. The church is at its best when it works hard at developing theology from the deposit of apostolic truth, recognizing that we, indeed, see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

The second category is *experiential*. Believers are to grow “in the knowledge of the Son of God.” The biblical concept of *gn\_osis* is far more profound than the mere assembling of items of information. It is “knowing by experience.” Paul speaks to this pointedly in his prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23. In that famous prayer list, first on his agenda is that the Ephesian believers might experience “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.” A profound and growing spiritual relationship with the

Lord is a central objective of New Testament teaching.

The third category Paul alludes to in Ephesians 4:13 is the *behavioral*. He cites the cultivation of an appropriate pattern of living as an important objective of ministry in the church: “That we ...become mature (*eis andra teleion*), attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” The root word for maturity is *telos*, meaning “end,” or “destiny.” The New Testament concept of sanctification lies right here. Paul calls the church to engage in a kind of ministry that will enable people to become what they are declared to be, to grow into Christlikeness. Sanctification is a *process*, not necessarily a *crisis*. It is a direction as much as an *achievement*.<sup>7</sup> Leadership is effective when the body of believers it serves is marked by people who are moving toward their destined quality of being, their *telos*.

To summarize Paul’s teaching from Ephesians 4, we may say that Christ has given gifts of leadership to the Church. The purpose of that leadership is to equip God’s people for ministry. The objectives of that ministry are that the people of God may grow in their understanding of God’s revelation, in a deeper experience with the living Lord, and in a quality of behavior that authentically reflects the inner Christian experience. It is important to note that this passage is a searching insight into the development of the *interior* life of the believer. To this must be appended the insights about the functions of the Apostolic Church from such passages as Acts 13:1-3, in which the objective of ministry moves beyond the cultivation of the *interior* life of the believer to the calling to penetrate the larger world with Christian witness. Melvin Hodges,

building on insights popularized by Roland Allen, had it right when he recognized that the biblical model for a New Testament kind of church certainly included the capacity to grow, to expand its numbers and to be “self-perpetuating.”<sup>8</sup>

We may summarize some fundamental principles for church structure that emerge from considering various New Testament passages:

*The Principle of Apostolicity.* The teaching of church leaders is tightly connected to the teaching of those commissioned by the Lord himself. All ministry is thus to be measured.

*The Principle of Adaptability.* Considering the emergence of unforeseen circumstances, such as one finds the Jerusalem church facing in Acts 6, considerable latitude is allowable in developing church structures. This frees the church to adopt culturally relevant church structure patterns, as long as such patterns do not inhibit the work of God.

*The Principle of Accountability.* Throughout the description of the various churches provided in the New Testament, there appears to be a commitment to the responsibility for self-government within local churches, with minimal direction from outside, except for the input from the apostles. With the passing of the original apostles, their teaching continues in the canon of the New Testament. It is to this that all churches and all church leadership are to be accountable. It appears that the people of God have an important role in determining how this accountability shall take place, chiefly through their

own selection of elders and deacons from their midst.<sup>9</sup>

*The Principle of Accessibility.* Apart from the leadership of the authorized apostles, there appears to be minimal suggestion of any hierarchy beyond the local churches. Certainly, in metropolitan centers, where there were likely several house churches, the churches in that community were on occasion referred to as forming a single “church.” For example, Paul wrote to the collective fellowships in the city of Thessalonica as if they formed one single entity: “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1). There is little evidence of any kind of hierarchy in such settings.

Let us now consider precisely what the New Testament writers had in mind for the role of apostles, the first of Christ’s gifts to the Church.

### **Kinds of Apostles in the New Testament**

*The Unique Apostleship.* A clear distinction must be made between the earliest “college of apostles” and all other Christian leaders, regardless of title or function. Ephesians 2:20 reports that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” One must begin by recognizing that Jesus is the principal apostle (Heb. 3:1), that is, he is the “Sent One” who divested himself of his rightful glory to minister salvation to this world. All apostolic ministry flows out of this primary understanding.

*The Inner Circle.* Jesus selected the original twelve apostles (Mt. 10:1,2; Mk. 6:30). To the initial cluster of disciples,

the original Twelve, Jesus also assigned the term “apostles” (Lk. 6:13). “The Twelve” is a term found twenty-one times in the four Gospels, indicating that this original group was widely recognized as the core of Jesus’ following. In Acts 1, the 120 disciples, including the eleven original disciples minus Judas, gathered in the Upper Room. They selected Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:26), feeling compelled to fill the vacancy occasioned by Judas’ fall. In this story, we learn what qualifications were understood to be necessary for this special group of apostles.

First, all in this group were specially called by the Lord. The Acts passage supplies further credentials.

Second, a candidate had to have been with the original called-out group throughout the time of the public ministry of Jesus (Acts 1:21).

Third, such a person must have been an eyewitness to the risen Lord following His resurrection (v.22). These special persons had lived with Jesus. They were authentic eyewitnesses to his life and teaching. Hence, the Early Church looked to them for a standard by which to guide and govern the emerging churches.

Paul is a special case. He recognized himself to be, and his colleagues acknowledged him to be, a genuine apostle. How are we to understand Paul as one of this very special company? This is an important issue, for Paul wrote more of the New Testament than any of the original Twelve. First, note that Paul began most of his epistles with a firm assertion that he wrote, not on his own merits but—being called by God—with

the apostolic authority received directly from God. This self-understanding is stated in its clearest form in Galatians 1. Paul said, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11,12). In the passage that follows, Paul set out his case very clearly. The other apostles, located in Jerusalem, recognized him as being on a plane of equal authority with them (Gal. 2:6-10). Paul understood himself to have seen Jesus, a basic qualification for being included in the apostolic list (1 Cor. 9:1). To Paul, the Damascus Road experience was intensely real; it was not just a vision. In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul spoke of himself, with respect to his relationship with Jesus, “as one untimely born.”<sup>10</sup>

From the data, we might then conclude that Paul, although not one of the earliest group of disciples Jesus called to himself during his public ministry, nonetheless was widely recognized as having special credentials that entitled him to speak authoritatively, along with the original Twelve.

*The Extended Apostolic College.* To this core of twelve (or thirteen) apostles, we must recognize that the college of apostles includes some others as well. All of the ancient documents circulating among the churches in the fourth century were scrutinized by both the Latin Church at the Council of Carthage and by the Greek Church through the decision of Athanasius in Alexandria. Independently, both wings of the Ancient Church agreed on the twenty-seven books in our present New Testament as the authentic writings of

the first-century apostles. In each case, the first criterion to which these documents were subjected was “apostolicity.” Was the document in question written by a first-century apostle, or *one closely associated with him*?

This “college of apostles” goes beyond the Twelve. It clearly includes Paul, but also includes Mark, the associate of Peter, and Luke, a close associate of Paul. To this list, we must add the writer of Hebrews who, if not Paul, clearly was one of his companions. Two in this college of apostles that were qualified because of their intimate association with Jesus are James and Jude, the half brothers of our Lord.<sup>11</sup> The teaching of these selected few was recognized in the first-century church as the ultimate authority for all things pertaining to faith and life. The Greek and Latin Churches of the fourth century validated this understanding as the canon of the New Testament came to be universally accepted.

J. Rodman Williams distinguishes between two kinds of apostles, “The Twelve plus Paul” and “Others Called Apostles.”<sup>12</sup> He designates the Twelve plus Paul as having “apostleship,” citing a term employed in both Acts 1:24,25 and Galatians 2:8 to identify those given special authority (*eis apostol\_n*). Paul uses this term in 1 Corinthians 9:2, identifying himself as one given the ministry of apostleship (*mou tes apostol\_s*). By this, Williams wishes to set apart that group of eyewitnesses who were authorized to speak authoritatively about the life and teachings of Jesus. For Williams, this is limited to the Twelve and Paul.

Perhaps, without doing injustice to the intent of Williams, we should broaden the designation to include those associates of Paul and the Twelve who were recognized as authoritative by the Early Church. Thus, the writings of Mark, Luke, James, Jude and perhaps one or two others may be added to Williams’ more narrow classification.

Whether one follows the narrower limit set out by Williams or includes the other recognized writing apostles, this designation is critically important. This sets the boundary of the canon of Scripture, the objective authority by which the Church in all ages is to evaluate all belief, experience and practice. These were uniquely placed in the first century and stand absolutely apart from all others.

It is clear that the writers of the New Testament had no intention of passing on this special apostleship to others who might follow. This unique gifting was not to be a matter of “apostolic succession,” nor was it ever intended to be restored in a later age. The revelation given to the first-century apostleship stands by itself. If this is not safeguarded, all manner of mischief inevitably follows.

This is precisely where charismatic movements through the course of history have foundered. Consider, for example, the Irvingite movement of nineteenth-century England, and their misguided attempt at restoring the offices of authoritative apostles. When the last of these apostles died about the beginning of the twentieth century, this movement virtually ceased to exist.

*Apostles: Special Assignment Callings.*  
It is important to note that the term

“apostle” is employed in the New Testament in ways beyond the narrower circle of “apostleship.” Acts 14:14 speaks of “the apostles Barnabas and Paul.” In this case, Barnabas appears to be listed as an apostle in the sense that he has been sent out as a missionary from the church at Antioch. In Galatians 1:18,19, Paul listed James, the brother of the Lord, as one of the apostles. In Acts 15, James is not identified as an apostle. A curious note found in Romans 16 cites Andronicus and Junias—one of whom may have been a woman—as outstanding apostles. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul seems to include Silas and Timothy along with himself as apostles (1 Thess. 1:1). In 2 Corinthians 8:18,22, unidentified representatives are sent as messengers. The term employed here is a cognate form of the verb “I send,” or *apostell\_*. What are we to make of this? It can be seen that in a much broader sense, those sent, or commissioned, for any special church assignment could be said to be “apostles,” or “sent ones.” Paul speaks of Epaphroditus, the elder from the church at Philippi who had been sent to him in Rome, as an (*apostolos*), one sent on an assignment from a local church.

This general, non-technical, use of the term is important for two reasons: (1) It is an acknowledgement that the church must make a place for special gifts of leadership and ministry, or for those commissioned by the church for special assignments. (2) It is this more narrowly defined use of the term that has application for the church today. It is a serious mistake to blur the distinction between the authoritative apostleship and other “special assignment” apostles described in the New Testament.

## Apostolic Ministry

In the broader sense identified above, the ministry of the first-century apostles may be summarized in the following ways:

The “general” apostles are pictured as being commissioned for special assignments, usually sent from a specific local church. Certainly, this was the case in the story of Epaphroditus, who was sent from the church at Philippi to minister to Paul on their behalf while Paul was in custody in Rome (Phil. 2:25-30).

The assignments to which these special envoys are dispatched appear to be primarily in pioneer settings (note the mission of Titus on Crete, for example.)

The apostles were involved in proclamation and witness, sometimes even being included in the writing of what were recognized later to be canonical documents. In a general sense, we can picture these individuals as filling a role not unlike that of modern-day missionaries.

In the process of ministry, such frontiersmen were expected to be empowered with charismatic ministries, exhibiting “signs and wonders” that were important instruments for verification of the gospel message (see Heb. 2:3,4). Notice that the miraculous was intended to be supportive of the proclaimed message, not an end in itself. Paul reported to the Thessalonians that he came to them with a proclamation (“with words”), but he came with more than mere words. He came to them “in power” (*en dunamei*) (1 Thess.1:5).

Clearly, Paul was led by the Holy Spirit. This theme is developed throughout the Book of Acts. Paul's ministry was Spirit-enabled and, further, it was guided by the Holy Spirit. He ministered "by the Spirit" (*en pneumati hagi\_*) (1 Thess. 1:5). He moved about "in the Spirit." From time to time, this included special revelations from God to the apostles. It is interesting to note that Paul received the warnings given by Agabus and others as being valid prophetic utterances, but he did not base his decision about the impending journey to Jerusalem on such utterances (see Acts 20:22-24). He accepted the dire warnings as useful for preparing him for coming hardship. Acts 16:10 is a useful clue as to how Paul made major decisions. Evidently, he stepped out "in faith," doing what was logical and rational, using his best judgment, depending on *confirmation* of such decisions by the Holy Spirit. Rarely did Paul receive such remarkable revelations as the "Macedonian call."

Some, if not all of the "general apostles," served under the direct supervision and oversight of the Unique Apostles. Luke, Silas, Timothy and Titus were associates of Paul; Mark was Peter's intimate colleague. We could say, by extension, that insofar as missionaries and other church leaders in our day are governed by the teaching of the Unique Apostles (that is to say, the canonical Scriptures), they too fall within this pattern.

This brief summary could be developed in more detail but, for our purposes, it will suffice to identify the broad parameters forming the shape of apostolic ministry. Let us now turn our attention to the question of "restorationism."

## **The Restoration of Apostles Examined**

Within the last two decades, a teaching has gained a significant hearing that calls for serious evaluation. It circulates about the theme of the restoration of the "Fivefold Offices" of New Testament ministry. First in that list is the office of apostle. The clear implication is that if the church of today is to fulfill the New Testament pattern and mandate, the offices cited in Ephesians 4:11 must be restored. Let us examine some of the issues raised by key exponents of restorationist theology.

### *Peter Wagner's Theology*

Peter Wagner, one of the major spokesmen for this movement, sees present-day apostles having "unusual authority." Wagner says: "Until recently the central focus of authority in our churches existed in groups, not in individuals. Trust has been placed in sessions, consistories, nominating committees, deacon boards, trustees, congregations, presbyteries, associations, general councils, cabinets, conventions, synods and the like. Rarely has trust for ultimate decision making been given to individuals such as pastors or apostles. This, however, is changing decisively in the New Apostolic Reformation."<sup>13</sup>

Wagner identifies several characteristics of apostles, basing his claims on a biblical assessment of the Unique Apostles we have identified above. The items he lists deserve serious consideration for present-day leaders, but I question his assumption that the apostolic authority of the Unique Apostles extends to leaders beyond the first century in the way Wagner urges. Wagner says, "Paul's authority as an

apostle came from the same sources that provide today's apostles with their extraordinary authority."<sup>14</sup> He lists the following:

1. Apostles have a spiritual gift (*charisma*). He cites the catalog of giftings found in 1 Corinthians 12, referring especially to v. 28. "Are all apostles?" Certainly not, Wagner affirms, but by implication, some in the church are apostles!<sup>15</sup> My question is, to what kind of apostles was Paul referring? Was he speaking of the Unique Apostolate, or of specially gifted and called ambassadors sent out as missionaries on frontier assignments, the general apostles?

2. Apostles have an assignment, or call. Citing 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Wagner recognizes that those endowed with charismatic leadership do not all have the same ministry or sphere of activity.<sup>16</sup> I have no quarrel with Wagner on this point, except to question whether Paul was speaking here of general apostles, the missionaries of the Early Church, rather than the Unique Apostles who have special credentials.

3. Apostles have extraordinary character. Wagner appeals here for holding leadership in the church to a high standard.<sup>17</sup> Who would question the desire to have church leaders whose lives are above reproach? Nevertheless, Wagner does not support this high-minded desire for apostolic credentials with Scriptures that specifically single out apostles. This clearly is a matter of general concern for church leadership in any capacity.

4. Apostles have followers. Wagner's point here is quite pragmatic: leaders have followers. You can recognize

apostles by the fact that they have a following.<sup>18</sup> This statement, of course, applies quite broadly to all leadership, even beyond the church world. I think what Wagner is reaching for is that current-day apostles are recognized by others as having this gifting.

5. Apostles have vision. Wagner sees true apostles as leaders who have the ability to cast vision for others. He sees modern-day apostles receiving "special revelations" from God, either through direct communication from God or through prophets in the church.<sup>19</sup> Pentecostals and charismatics of today certainly should be open to receiving prophetic insights, either directly or through others in the church who may have a "word from the Lord." However, it is not at all clear from the New Testament that this is to be limited to "apostles." Perhaps what Wagner is wishing to communicate is that true apostles regularly exhibit such special insights from God.

6. Apostles have determined spheres.<sup>20</sup> To this I heartily ascribe. However, the calling of apostles ("sent ones") to differing fields and kinds of leadership service fit nicely into the picture provided in the New Testament of general apostles, or missionaries.<sup>21</sup>

The fundamental question I have for Wagner centers in his apparent blurring of the boundaries between the carefully limited authority of the Unique Apostles and all other apostles, "sent ones" or frontier missionaries. Because of this, it appears that Wagner has opened the door to serious abuses of power and authority.

### *The Theology of David Cartledge*

David Cartledge, esteemed colleague from Australia, has called for an “Apostolic Revolution.” Crucial to his methodology is his call for a “Pentecostal hermeneutic.” Cartledge brushes aside not only liberal methods of biblical interpretation, but castigates modern Pentecostals for submitting to the “rationalism” inherent in orthodox evangelical hermeneutics. He casts aspersion on the idea of limiting our hearing from God to the words of the Bible. Cartledge says, “A third and quite confusing hermeneutical method is that employed by many evangelicals. They insist that God only speaks to people through the Bible. At face value, this appears to be highly commendable. However, further examination reveals that this is closer to rationalism than faith. It is actually a defence (sic) mechanism that enables them to deny anything supernatural.”<sup>22</sup>

Cartledge fails to distinguish the unique apostolic authority of the Bible from all other admissible revelations, such as prophetic utterances, that are available to the church. By dismissing evangelical commitment to the authority of the written Word of God, Cartledge opens the door to a disturbing level of subjectivism. In addition, flowing out of this understanding of “continuing revelation,” he hands contemporary church leaders, to whom he assigns the office of apostle, a kind of authority that rises above human criticism. Cartledge places these modern-day apostles within local churches.<sup>23</sup> One is inclined to suspect that any successful pastor of a large, thriving church may be included within an identifiable circle of fellow apostles, leaders whose judgments are to be followed uncritically by their

respective congregations. After all, who is going to dispute with an apostle? One wonders to whom these leaders are accountable. What checks are there for the possibility of abuse of such great power? For a thoughtful look at this issue, I suggest James Cobble’s book, *The Church and the Powers: A Theology of Church Structure*.<sup>24</sup>

Cartledge points out that, in deference to the democratically oriented citizenry of his nation, the apostles in the Australian Assemblies of God are not given the title of apostle. Cartledge makes clear that the function, not the title, of apostle is critical.<sup>25</sup>

A central thesis of Cartledge, based on the recent history of the Assemblies of God in Australia, is that their fresh look at the biblical model of church leadership has released the churches to fresh vision, vitality and growth. Their story is certainly dramatic and invites examination for possible lessons that may be learned. However, a preliminary opinion of the author is that creating a situation in which individual church leaders are supplied with virtually unlimited power opens the door to serious abuse. Moreover, there remains the critical issue of just how biblical is this new “restoration” model, after all.

### **Conclusion**

It appears that the question of whether New Testament-like apostles should be restored to the modern church must begin with the issue of religious authority. Clearly, the Early Church operated under the Christ-given authority of the Unique Apostles. A case can be made for a distinction between the Unique Apostles and the ministry of others in the New Testament era—those

who were called “apostles” in a more general sense—as emissaries of local churches. Although such “sent ones” carried considerable authority, it is quite clear that such authority did not reach the level of the Unique Apostles. Consequently, it is questionable if giving the title of “apostle” to any present-day individuals is in order. The reason for this caution is clear. To many, the title “apostle” bears the connotation of authority on a level with the Scriptures.

It is helpful to learn that the Australian Assemblies of God has not felt it necessary to title their significant charismatic leaders “apostles.” They have sought to make central the concept of apostolic functions, rather than supplying titles that may occasion unexpected consequences.

In all this discussion, there clearly are lessons to be learned. A case may be made that in the New Testament, those sent out from the various churches on

special pioneer assignments were expected to go in the power of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic ministry was considered crucial for the development and expansion of the Early Church. There is no indication that this urgency has changed. Certainly, the church of the twenty-first century needs leaders, called by God, to minister in apostolic power! The Pentecostal and charismatic churches of our day need the anointing of the Holy Spirit and need to recognize and make room for those whom God has set apart for special apostolic service. This has been true from the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement and continues to be true in our time, as well. God continues to call people to pioneer service in many fields. He is equipping humble vessels with supernatural abilities and authority, with no need for any special kind of title. It is the function, not the name that is crucial. May we become more available to the empowering Spirit for the task at hand!

## End Notes

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3. General Council minutes, 1949, 26, 27.
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10. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 732-34.
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12. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, Vol. III. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 165-67.
13. C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*. (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2000), 25.
14. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 26.
15. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 27.
16. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets* 28.
17. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 28, 29.
18. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 32-33.
19. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 33-37.
20. Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets*, 38, 39.
21. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 169.
22. Cartledge, *Apostolic Revolution*, 169.
23. Cartledge, *Apostolic Revolution*, 267.
24. James Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 91, 92.
25. Cartledge, *Apostolic Revolution*, 397