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The Makings of an Apostle

It's time to look at what the New Testament tells us about 'apostleship'

by James McBride

At the heart of governance in the church of God lies the function of 'apostle'. The term is avoided by some church organizations but embraced by others. When used it is in the context of church authority - one man (usually) rules - and dominates - the organization, his word unchallenged in doctrine, in administration.

Jesus is the archetypal Apostle (Hebrews 3:1) but the New Testament notes numerous other 'apostles'. They include The Twelve, Paul, and several others. What is their function? How did they operate?

The Twelve

The word *apostle* simply signifies 'a person (or thing) sent'. Jesus during his ministry, sent out twelve of his disciples to 'herald' the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven. They had been carefully selected following close observation and a night spent in prayer. These men he named '*apostles*' (Matthew 10: 2). They were originally selected by Jesus for special training and were with him from the beginning to the end of his ministry. This was essential to their calling (Acts 1:21f), as were the '*signs of an apostle*': endurance, signs, wonders, works of power (Acts 2:43, II Corinthians 12:12).

Frequently called 'The Twelve', they were also '*apostles of the Lamb*' (Revelation 21:14), '*apostles of the Lord*' (Jude 1:17) and '*holy apostles*' (Revelation 18:20). So special are they that they are forever remembranced in the foundations of the '*holy Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God*'.

The Apostle Paul

Paul, too, was an apostle equal to the Twelve. During his lifetime the apostle Paul fought to maintain his

status as an apostle. He had been a bitter and violent persecutor of the infant church, and indeed himself recognized his unworthiness on that count to be an apostle equal to the Twelve (I Corinthians 15:9). But Jesus himself had commissioned him and taught him. On the road to Damascus Jesus struck him blind to get his attention. To a local Christian to whom he was sent Jesus said of Paul: '*...Go, for this one is a chosen vessel to Me, to bear My name before nations and kings and the sons of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.*' (Acts 9: 15, 16). His ministry exhibited all the '*signs of an apostle*' and he certainly 'endured' (II Corinthians 12:12). It could be said that Paul - guided and inspired by Jesus - contributed more than any to the future education of the church.

The Twelve and Paul were uniquely commissioned by Jesus. Their function [see sidebar] can not be duplicated at any time, in any church organization.

What, then, of those called in the Scriptures '*apostles of the churches*'?

Apostles of the Churches

Paul had numerous co-workers helping to fulfil his commission. At least some are called '*apostles [KJV messengers] of the churches*' (II Corinthians 8:23). Epaphroditus, for example, is so called: '*But I thought it needful to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker, and my fellow soldier, and your messenger [Gk apostle] and minister of my need*' (Philippians 2:25). He was the 'apostle' to the Philippian assemblies. This class of 'sent ones' were faithful brethren entrusted by their local assembly with important functions. Another example may have

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been those men sent out by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-5) - in this case to preach. They were not necessarily 'elders, deacons' though some may have been. Note the varied use of the word for 'deacon' in the Scriptures. (In Judaism the term was applied to officers who conveyed the Temple tax from the local synagogues of the Diaspora to Jerusalem.)

Recall that at the end of the first century the Ephesian assemblies were encouraged by the apostle John to discern which 'apostles' were authentic (Revelation 2: 2). In Paul's day such bore with them '*letters of commendation*' (II Corinthians 3:1) as they were possibly 'strangers' - unknown - to the assembly (III John 5,6).

Thus the term 'apostle' had a dual application - to those especially, uniquely and personally commissioned by Jesus (The Twelve and Paul), and to those delegated by their local assembly for specific tasks.

It would not be wrong to assume that in the church of century twenty-one there could be some such 'apostles of the churches'. There are indeed such functionaries in the churches today but they don't have the title. The governance of modern church of God organizations, however, can exclude such emissaries, given the control structure in place. But there are, sadly, false apostles as in the first century.

Modern Apostles

The title ('apostle') is often viewed as an office - even a 'rank' - rather than what it really describes, a

apostolic work...

There is no indication in the Scriptures that the apostolic authority was in any way autocratic. The Twelve were endowed with special powers to 'launch' the New Testament church - an extension of the ministry of Jesus. Note Paul's approach to the brethren in Corinth: 'Not that we have lordship over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for in faith you stand fast' (II Corinthians 1:24).

The apostles, guided by Jesus, set the pattern for the governance of the church and passed on his teachings in purity. The church is '...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone' (Ephesians 2:19-20). That is, on the writings of the Old and of the New Testaments. These represent '...the faith once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3), and which was to be passed down the generations: '... the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also' (II Timothy 2:2).

Wherever they laboured, to these ends the apostles, instructed, corrected and encouraged the infant church of God.

When necessary an instruction was given always based on Christ's teachings (I Corinthians 7:10). Or, when there was no such guidance it was made clear the guidance was personal (I Corinthians 12:25). By virtue of God's oversight such 'apostolic opinions' are preserved in Scripture for our guidance.

function, and in modern usage is confined to 'the man at the top'. He is considered, by himself and by his followers, to have the same status as did Peter or John or the other apostles directly appointed by Jesus. Often he claims divine inspiration for his pronouncements on doctrine, and sees himself as in unbroken 'apostolic succession' from the Twelve.

Jesus has, of course, imparted spiritual gifts individually upon his or her baptism to each Christian. Among these gifts is that of 'teaching'. A blend of skills enables some individuals to clearly expound the Scriptures. But, even though so gifted, a teacher can at times be in error. He or she is not infallible. Some human emotion - such as vanity, arrogance - can instill a sense of superiority and if the individual is charismatic can attract a supine following. Even Paul recognized his limitations: '*Imitate me*' he said, '*as I also of Christ*' (I Corinthians 11:1). Peter, too, was in error at times (Acts 10:9-17, Galatians 2: 11-14).

At the end of the first century the apostle John commended the brethren in Ephesus for their discernment in regard to those claiming to be apostles: '*...and you tried [tested] those pretending to be apostles and are not, and found them to be liars*' (Revelation 2:2).

It's a lesson the modern church of God must heed.

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