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What is an Apostle?

**In some Christian circles there's much ado about 'end-time apostles'.
Was there - is there - such a person? If so, how can he - or she - be identified?**

by James McBride

There can be little doubt as to who the apostles were in New Testament times. Jesus himself selected them. They are 'The Twelve' (John 6:70). And - if we are to accept the authenticity of the New Testament - Paul, also personally selected by Jesus. In later years, as recorded in the New Testament, there were other, minor functionaries designated as 'apostles' - the 'messengers of the churches'. Whatever powers were exercised by individuals in the New Testament, The Twelve have a unique and irreplaceable position. There were, too - just as today - men who falsely claimed to be apostles (Revelation 2:2).

What, then, about the centuries since? Undeniably, the teachings of the original apostles became corrupted in succeeding years - even before their deaths. The apostle Paul especially - but also Peter and John - battled those who would pervert the true message of Jesus Christ. Since then, men have arisen who sought to restore these original teachings. Are they, too, apostles?

What Is An Apostle?

It's important that we define apostleship. Essentially, they were men (always) directly chosen by Jesus (Luke 6:13) and sent out by him. (The word means 'one sent forth'). Following the apostasy and death of Judas, Peter outlined the necessary qualifications for a replacement: "Therefore of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22).

Jesus directly taught these men during the six weeks between his resurrection and his ascension to heaven

(Acts 1:3). Paul, too, was directly taught by Jesus (Galatians 1:12). Jesus inspired them to establish his true teachings after he ascended to the Father, and to write them down for our learning. What they taught was 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). Their legacy is the bench-mark by which all teaching through the Christian ages is to be judged. And in our day.

Signs of an Apostle

Their apostleship was confirmed by the visible fruit they bore. Says Paul: "...in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you [the Corinthian brethren] with all perseverance: in signs and wonders and mighty deeds" (II Corinthians 11-12). The available brief record of the lives of the apostles testifies to these signs in them. They - through spiritual gifting - healed the sick and the disabled. They raised the dead. They miraculously opposed their adversaries, as did Peter with the Samaritan sorcerer Simon (Acts 8: 9-24), who sought to profit from his spiritual work.

Of course, there were and are false apostles. To the brethren in the late first-century Ephesian assemblies, Jesus said: "...you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not" (Revelation 2:2). Whatever 'signs and wonders' they are reported to perform, the brand of Christianity the false apostles purvey is far removed from the teachings proclaimed by Jesus and his apostles. Of them Jesus warned: "...false christs and false prophets [ie political and religious leaders] will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Another time he said: "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord,

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Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonderful works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7: 22, 23).

Integrity

Another mark of apostleship was personal integrity. God will forgive even transient denial - as with Peter. That same apostle was, too, guilty of moral weakness and hypocrisy when with the brethren in Antioch. Although un-stated, it is certain that Peter humbly repented on both counts (Galatians 2:11-21). By contrast, Judas Iscariot by his transgression - he became a guide to those who arrested Jesus (Acts 1:16) - fell from his apostleship (v.25). Otherwise, whatever their personal characteristics as human beings, the lives of the apostles were holy and righteous and in submission to the divinely revealed standards of behaviour. They lived simply, worked with their hands, did not have many possessions, lived by faith.

The behaviour, therefore, of anyone claiming to be an apostle - or who is described by others as an apostle - will be above reproach at every level. The personal qualities of the overseers of an assembly (see I Timothy 3, Titus 1) are the minimum for one who claim to represent Jesus at the level of apostle.

Doctrinal Orthodoxy

Further, anyone whose teaching is in conflict with the teachings of The Twelve and Paul - as recorded in the New Testament - abrogates the right to claim, or be acclaimed as having, apostleship. As an addendum to the writings of the New Covenant, the apostle John warns: “If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city and from the things that are written in this book” (Revelation 22: 18-19). It’s a solemn warning for the end-time (v.20).

Authority - Then and Now

There’s no doubt that The Twelve and Paul exercised oversight on all the assemblies in their jurisdiction. It was the authority to highlight false teachings and to point out false teachers. It was the authority to correct the behavioural and doctrinal aberrations they encountered. It was the authority, too, to be ‘helpers of your joy’, to encourage, to support. The authority to exercise oversight firmly but with humility and gentleness. Above all it was the authority to relay to the church the mind of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 2:16).

But the apostles did not exercise their power within the context of an organized hierarchy - a system rejected by Jesus (Luke 22:25-26) as the form of worldly governments. The assemblies in a city - and especially its leadership of overseers and deacons - were directly responsible to Jesus Christ for how they taught the brethren, and for the moral integrity of the brethren and of their assembly. All will be held to account! When a man - or woman - is elevated in the minds of brethren to a position of dominance rather than service, almost inevitably their critical faculties are numbed. They come to believe just about anything ‘the great one’ dictates (*cf* Acts 8: 9-10).

In those days there existed few if any written statements with apostolic authority. However, God saw to it that the essential teachings of Jesus were recorded for future generations (John 17:20). It is to these writings, to the New Testament, that we look for our twenty-first century apostolic authority. Every Christian is obliged to personally prove from the Scriptures the doctrines of any teacher to whom he or she gives credence (Acts 17: 11-12)..

In sum, those who claim apostleship for an individual should note that individual’s personal lifestyle and carefully compare what they teach with the Scriptures.

Should you follow someone acclaimed as - or who claims to be - an apostle? Hear the authentic apostle, Paul: “*Follow me as I follow Christ*” (I Corinthians 11:1).

Published by:

The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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