

APOSTLE

The foundation of the church

Key question

What is an apostle and what is their role?

Key text

Luke 6:13

“He called His disciples to him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles.”

Key Definition

Apostle

One who is commissioned with a message is called an apostle.

Introduction

The early church recognized certain leaders as apostles with special authority. While the original 12 occupied a role that can not be replicated to day, there are examples in the early church of those who bore the title and shared an important role that may be needed in the church of every age.

A. What was an Apostle?

1. “The one commissioned or sent out” is the basic meaning of the Greek word APOSTOLOS.
2. **Jesus** was called an Apostle in **Heb.3:1** “consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.”
3. **The 12 (with Paul)** made up a special group of Apostles. The term is used most often in the NT in reference to this group.
 - a. They were called by Jesus **Lk.6:13** “He called His disciples to him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles.”
 - b. They were eye witness to the resurrected Jesus **Acts.1:21-22** “It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us - beginning with the baptism of John until the day

that He was taken up from us - one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection.”, (2:32, 3:15 13:31)

- c. They were anointed to work signs and wonders **II Cor.12:12** “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you”
- d. They became the Foundation of the church. **Eph.2:20** “having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.”
- e. They defined the doctrines of the Gospel. **Jn.20:23** “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they have been retained.” (Matt.18:18 “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”)
- f. Paul was numbered with the twelve **I Cor.15:9** “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” **II Cor.11:5** “For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles.” **Gal.1:17** “nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia,” **I Thess.2:6** “as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.”
- g. They were sent by God. **Lk.11:49** “For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute.’”

4. The Apostles of the church

- a. Apostles “of the churches” in general. **II Cor.8:23** “As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers (apostles) of the churches, a glory to Christ.” **Phil.2:25** “But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger (apostle) and minister to my need;”
- b. It is implied that James was an apostle. **Gal.1:19** “But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.”
- c. It is suggested that there is a larger body of men called apostles that are distinct from the 12. **I Cor.15:5,7** “and then He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. . . then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

5. **False apostles. Rev.2:2** “I now your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.”

B. The Role of the Apostles

1. **Eph.4:10-16** “¹⁰ He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) ¹¹ **And He gave some {as} apostles, and some {as} prophets, and some {as} evangelists, and some {as} pastors and teachers,** ¹² **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service,** to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all {aspects} into Him, who is the head, {even} Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which

every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

2. **The Acts of the Apostles:** Luke begins the Book of Acts where he left off in his gospel. Acts records the initial fulfillment of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 as it traces the beginning and growth of the New Testament church. Christ's last words before His ascension were so perfectly realized in the Book of Acts that they effectively and concisely outline its contents: "*You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem (ch.1-7), and in all Judea (ch.8-12), and to the end of the earth (ch.13-28)*" - Acts 1:8. Thus, Acts traces the rapid expansion of the gospel, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading throughout the Roman Empire. It centers its attention upon three Apostles - Peter (1-7), Philip (8-12) & Paul (13-28) with a conspicuous parallel of events in Peter's and Paul's ministries.

	PETER	PAUL
Heals a lame man	3:2-	14:8
His shadow heals	5:15	19:12
Exorcized demons	5:16	16:18
Victory over Sorcerer	8:18	13:6
Raise the dead	9:36-	20:9
Gentile vision	10:9	22:17-
Deliverance from prison	12:7-	16:25-

C. **Apostolic Succession**

1. Apostolic succession is to be understood in terms of the continuity and continuation of Apostolic doctrine not Apostolic presence. Apostolic succession is fulfilled when the Apostles teaching and witness is heard, respected, believed, confessed, and followed. I Tim.3:2-7; II Tim.1:14; Titus1:5-9.
2. It is the whole church and not merely a fragment of it that is the temple of the Spirit, built on the foundation of the apostles (Eph.2:20).
3. The rise of Apostolic Succession Teaching in the early church came in response to heretical groups. These groups were unable to trace their heritage (through their leaders) back to the Apostles Peter and Paul who centered the church's many branches in Rome.
4. The leaders in the early church were ordained by elders not by "the" bishop. I Tim.4:14
5. There is no indication that Peter was seen by others or saw himself as "the bishop" of the catholic church.
6. Exegesis of **Matthew 16:13-19** ¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He {began} asking His disciples, saying, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some {say} John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon

Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal {this} to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and **upon this rock I will build My church**; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

- a. Does this passage teach us that Peter and his successors are to be the foundation of the church? The text does seem to identify Peter with “this rock” but it is unclear as to in what sense this is so. The “you” in verse 19 is singular but later in Matt.18:18 (Jn.20:22-23) it is plural referring to the whole apostolic company. Some have offered the following rendering of vs.18 “Thou art Peter (Petros) a stone and upon this (the) rock (Petra) will I found My Church.” The rock could be 1) Peter, 2) Peter’s confession, 3) Peter’s faith, 4) Christ, 5) the function of the Apostles described in verse 19. The grammar suggests but does not demand #1 but this does not seem to square with the rest of the NT teaching.
 - b. The text says nothing about Peter’s successors’, infallibility, or exclusive authority. These late interpretations entail significant exegetical and historical problems—e.g., after Peter’s death, his “successor” would have authority over a surviving apostle, John. What the NT does show is that Peter is the first to make this formal confession and that his prominence continues in the earliest years of the church (Acts 1-12). But he, along with John, can be sent by other apostles (Acts 8:14); and he is held accountable for his actions by the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18) and rebuked by Paul (Gal.2:11-14). He is, in short, *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”); and on the foundation of such men (Eph.2:20), Jesus built his church. That is precisely why Jesus, toward the close of his earthly ministry spent so much time with them. The honor was not earned but stemmed from divine revelation (v.17) and Jesus’ building work (v.18).
 - c. This is the first reference to the church in the N.T. Note that it is viewed as a future reality not a past or present entity. Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit initiated the church as the “Body of Christ”.
7. Peter’s leadership in the early church.
- a. In Jn.21:15-19, Jesus summoned Peter three times to “feed my lambs”.
 - b. Peter played a leading role in Acts (1:15-26; 2:14-40; 5:1-11; 8:14-25; 9:32-42).
 - c. As the number of believers multiplied, the way the churches were directed changed. The New Testament pattern was one of a plurality of leadership in the churches. There were elders (also called bishops and overseers) and deacons. By the end of the first century a trend was discernible that would be the norm for several centuries. The terms “elders and “bishops” came to signify separate offices. Elders remained a plurality in the churches; bishops did not. Thus, in each church a pattern developed of having a single bishop over each church - a quasi-episcopal form of government. No bishop, however, was seen as having a greater apostolic authority than any others throughout the empire.
 - d. The early church possessed the Old Testament Scriptures and viewed them as anticipatory of the greater revelation of Christ. Since the New Testament writings were emerging in a non-cohesive fashion and were not universally recognized, the question of the authority of the message was paramount. “How do you know this new message is true?” the early churchmen were frequently asked. The reply of the early church was that of a *truth succession* (an oral tradition of the gospel). God

revealed his word through and in Christ, Christ conveyed that message to the apostles, who in turn taught it to their successors, the bishops in the churches. Authority resided in the church through the bishop, who was a successor of an apostle.

- e. The ideas of a single bishop in each church (a view seen earliest in Ignatius of Antioch) and a succession of bishops stemming from an apostle (a view seen earliest in Clement of Rome) are related to the issue of the authority of the new message of the gospel and the Christian faith. The shift to a single bishop was only gradually achieved; for example, plurality of leadership in the church at Rome continued into the time of bishop Sixtus in the second century.

8. John Stott on apostolic succession

“Almost deafened by the babel of voices in the contemporary church, how are we to decide whom to follow? The answer is: we must test them all by the teaching of the apostles of Jesus Christ. 'Peace and mercy' will be on the church when it 'walks by this rule' (Gal. 6:16). Indeed, this is the only kind of apostolic succession we can accept – not a line of bishops stretching back to the apostles and claiming to be their successors (for the apostles were unique in both authorization and inspiration, and they have no successors), but loyalty to the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament. The teaching of the apostles, now permanently preserved in the New Testament, is to regulate the beliefs and practices of the church of every generation. This is why the Bible is over the church and not vice versa. The apostolic authors of the New Testament were commissioned by Christ, not by the church, and wrote with the authority of Christ, not of the church. 'To that authority (sc. of the apostles)', as the Anglican bishops said at the 1958 Lambeth Conference, 'the Church must ever bow.' Would that it did! The only church union schemes which can be pleasing to God and beneficial to the church are those which first distinguish between apostolic traditions and ecclesiastical traditions and then subject the latter to the former.” --
From "The Message of Galatians" (The Bible Speaks Today series: London and Downers Grove: IVP, 1968), p. 186.