

THE PRIMACY OF THE APOSTLES

The NT throughout either clearly teaches 'the primacy of the Apostles' within early Christianity, or simply assumes it, whereas much of modern Western Christianity has either forgotten them or gives them hardly any place at all. This results in many problems and mistakes when we read the NT, mistakes which earlier Christian generations simply did not make because they had a much bigger and healthier idea of the importance of the Apostles. This essay will present just some of the evidence and throw down some challenges to the modern Christian reader.

DENIAL: One way to rob the Apostles of any influence is simply to deny they were in any way special among the first Christians. For some people this has been driven by a desire to avoid and deny the authority of the Bible and the NT which records the words of the Apostles, while other people are so taken up with the modern ideas of democracy and equality and individual rights that they resent the idea that anyone could be an Apostle who was above or better than or more favoured or more empowered than another – all believers had the Holy Spirit and so all believers were equal! Others will simply DELETE the Apostles from any discussion of modern ministries since it is clear no one has any apostles, and this in turn must reflect back on their reading of the NT.

DEMOTION: In I Cor 12 and Ephesians 4 Paul gives us important lists of ministries in which Apostles are mentioned 'FIRST,' but in some recent discussions I have seen they have been demoted to number 19. So much for Biblical Authority!

DUPLICATION: Some modern groups have undermined our understanding of the uniqueness and importance of the NT Apostles by electing their own Apostles, calling them Apostles of Christ, and giving them great power and authority and claiming miracles for them. Prominent among such groups are the Mormons in America who by the year 1833 had developed Apostles, the Seventy, elders, High Priests, teachers, deacons, evangelists and bishops, and their leader Joseph Smith proclaimed himself equal to any prophet, or priest or apostle in the Bible.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF THE APOSTLES OF CHRIST:

The modern Denial, Deletion, Demotion and Duplication of the Apostles conflicts with the traditional view outlined below, to which I will add some perhaps more controversial points of my own:

The Apostles Were:

- Few in number
- Chosen carefully by Christ
- Called by Christ personally
- Trained by Christ personally
- Authorised by Christ
- Empowered by Christ
- Founders of churches
- Exercising authority over churches
- Authoritative sources of the NT records of the gospel
- Never replaced after they had died.

Plus

- There were special “Signs” of an Apostle
- The Apostles gave the Holy Spirit to others
- Apostleship combined all the other “gifts” and ministries listed, and was
- The centre and source of those other Christian ministries.

Most Evangelicals would agree with at least the first nine points, so what is the problem? The problem comes when we don't look carefully enough at what many parts of the NT are saying to us when we read them, and the result is that we often take statements which applied only to the Apostles – not to anybody else – and apply these statements to ourselves and all believers. The nine points above show that there can be a very big gap between the Apostles and ourselves and we are not reading correctly if we ignore this gap. I first became aware of this problem in our reading when I was doing some research into Pentecostalism and I came to see that both Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism often showed the same weakness in the way they read the NT – they both tend to read themselves into NT passages where they have no place – important and even explosive passages which promise great gifts and power to the Apostles but not to all believers.

The Lord Jesus was often alone with the Twelve. He often separated them from the crowds and even from his other followers and gave them special instruction, special promises and special warnings, making it clear that many of them would have to pay a big price for the privilege of following him. All this can be readily found from a close reading of the Gospels so there is no need to illustrate the point, but we can note that the Twelve themselves had seen this difference and asked 'Why do you talk one way to the crowd and another way to us in private?'

The disciples were talking about the different **contexts** they had noticed, and we should notice them too. What the Lord said to the Twelve often applied only to them as his chosen Apostles, and not to the crowd – and not to us. We should learn to think long and hard about what he says and to whom he is saying it and not rush in and think he is talking to us and about us all the time.

It is all too easy for us to succumb to pride and to see ourselves as more important than we really are, even to the point of challenging the special position of the Apostles. The same mistake is seen long ago in Miriam and Aaron in relation to their younger brother Moses in the desert. They felt that Moses was unfairly getting all the credit, all the glory – he was hogging the spotlight and getting unfair treatment from the Lord. In Numbers chapter 12 we see that they did have some sort of case – their claim was that the Lord had not only spoken through Moses but also through them. Indeed he had, but they had not been chosen as leader, Moses had been, and their pride had led them into childish rebellion against Moses and the Lord, and a very similar situation is seen in the two letters from Paul to the Corinthians. Some of the Corinthians too were in rebellion against Paul and Paul sees this as rebellion also against the Lord who had chosen him and sent him to them. Miriam and Aaron were allowed to live but it was a very close call and we, before we challenge the position of the Apostles, should also learn a proper degree of humility. It is a serious thing to reach out and try to grasp something, even something good in itself like the Apostleship, which does not belong to us.

Our problem becomes very acute when for example we read the middle chapters of John's Gospel, that is chapters 13 through 17, and especially 14 – 16. They contain many things which we might like to have as Christians but when we look at the context of these 'Final Discourses' we see that Jesus has ended his public ministry to Israel and has withdrawn into what seems to be a complete private isolation with the Twelve. These chapters should be renamed the 'PRIVATE FINAL DISCOURSES.' After Judas leaves and goes out into the darkness the Lord becomes very serious and very intense with the Eleven. He speaks to them very fully about his departure, about the wonderful coming and presence and assistance of the Holy Spirit, but also the warning: 'If the world hates you, know that it has already hated me before it hated you' (John 16:18). Of course many of the benefits they are promised have spilled over and been to some degree inherited and enjoyed by later generations of believers, but these things are ours, so to speak, only by the concession and generosity of the original recipients.

I would like to return to a couple of the points in the list above:

The Apostles were never replaced after they died

No single fact about the Apostles of Jesus Christ points more strongly to their unique position than the fact that as they died there was no recorded effort to replace them with new Apostles, with the exception of course of the early suicide of Judas. The first death of an Apostle, that of James who was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2) is said to have pleased the Jews and no doubt caused much consternation among the believers, but he was not replaced. The Apostleship, after the late and contentious addition of Paul 'as one born out of time' (I Cor 15:8), was not something that could be repeated, and while Paul does urge the Corinthians to seek the more prominent ministries he

never tells anyone to desire to be an Apostle. That thought was totally repugnant to him and in 2 Corinthians 11:13 he fiercely opposes some self-promoting people whom he calls 'pseudo apostles.'

The selection criteria for Apostles were very strict and the will of the Lord Jesus in choosing them was clearly understood and respected, as was the concept of having a 'roll' of names. This is seen as early as Acts 1, where the man chosen to replace Judas will become 'a witness, with us, to his resurrection' and also 'enrolled with the eleven Apostles.' Both these statements are very carefully chosen, as are others on the same subject. In Acts 10:41 Peter, speaking to the Gentile household of Cornelius, says that the risen Lord Jesus; 'did not show himself to the whole Jewish people but only to the WITNESSES chosen beforehand by God, that is TO US, those who ate and drank with him after his resurrection from the dead.' This strong expression of choosing and appointing and witnessing is repeated in Acts 22:4 and 22:16 where Paul applies it to himself but is not used to refer to people who were not Apostles. All these points are very important in our understanding of the NT teaching on this matter and in short we can extend this theme and say that the selection criteria for Christ's Apostles, Christ's Witnesses and Christ's Ambassadors were exactly the same and that these three job descriptors are interchangeable so that:

Apostle = Witness = Ambassador

So what follows from this? What follows is that we have to be very careful and clear in our thinking when we claim to be a 'witness' for Christ, or anyone claims to be an 'ambassador' for Christ. The NT writers were very careful in everything they wrote and we dishonour them when we throw their words around just to suit ourselves at any moment.

There were special 'Signs' of an Apostle

The idea of special signs which pointed to God's chosen spokesman was as old as Noah and his ark. They were seen again in the lives of Abraham and his family and then there was a long gap during the time in Egypt until the time of the baby Moses in a sort of 'mini-ark.' The burning bush began a 40 year period of signs and wonders under Moses and they were also seen from time to time in the later history of Israel until the time of Jesus Christ and his chosen Apostles. We see in Acts 4:30 that miracles of healing were seen as a vital part of the Apostolic ministry at the very earliest point and in 2 Corinthians 12:11-12 Paul speaks with great agitation against his critics in the Corinthian church: 'I have been a fool in commending myself but you have forced me to it because you should have been the ones commending me! The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works,' and in Romans 15 Paul makes another very important statement which combines word and deed, preaching and signs and wonders (15:18-19).

Giving the Holy Spirit to others: Apostles and 'Sub-Apostles'

As you can see in the heading above I want to identify a new category of NT ministry called 'Sub-Apostles' in order to do justice to three extraordinary men – Stephen, Philip and Ananias – and their relationship to the coming and giving of the Holy Spirit.

Many books discuss the signs and wonders of the NT but very few give serious attention to the place of the Apostles in bringing or giving the Holy Spirit to other people, in fact it seems to be routinely avoided. Perhaps it is too hot to handle. The NT does not give us as much information as we might like but some things are clear – the Holy Spirit was given in the presence of the Apostles, firstly at Pentecost, again in Samaria with Peter and John, in the house of Cornelius with Peter, and again in Ephesus with Paul. Of course these are special occasions because these are the key points outlined in the Gospel programme in Acts 1:8 'Jerusalem, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.'

So the Apostles could give people the Holy Spirit, but what about other believers – could they do the same back then, and what about today? Now Acts clearly says that when Philip the Deacon first preached the gospel in Samaria, although he was a man known for mighty works (as was Stephen, but he had already been killed), Philip's preaching and signs, which included exorcism (Acts 8:6), brought about faith but not the giving and presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit on this occasion was given only through the laying on of hands of the Apostles (Acts 8:14—24). This was the 'Sign of the Apostle' and Philip was not an Apostle. He gave the Gospel with Signs but could not give the Holy Spirit in Samaria.

The Third Sub-Apostle, the elder Ananias in Damascus, seems to be the only other person who is seen to give the Holy Spirit to another when in Acts 9:17 he lays hands on the blinded Saul of Tarsus. While not an Apostle he is also not what we might call an 'ordinary' believer, rather he is a respected leader and the equivalent in Damascus of Stephen and Philip in Jerusalem. How then was Ananias able to give the Holy Spirit to someone else? It seems to have been a special case, since Saul would later be thankful that he was not baptised and instructed by another Apostle so that he could say that his gospel was not dependent on them, and Paul, in his turn, brought both the Gospel and the Holy Spirit to the new churches he established. Questions remain but I think the idea of some of the early Deacons being 'Sub-Apostles' helps to clarify things. There is no evidence that Timothy and Titus and other lieutenants of Paul ever performed Signs and Wonders themselves although they must have seen Paul do so.

The Apostleship was the centre and source of the other ministries

When Paul gives lists of Christian ministries (I Cor 12 and Eph 4) he puts Apostleship in first place and in my study of this I have tried to honour Paul by giving his words full weight. Given the fact that the Apostles were not replaced as they died, and the fact that they held first place, and the fact that various other ministries were given by the Apostles, what does that mean for the list of ministries in I Corinthians 12 for example? If there is a sort of chain and the first link in the chain is missing, what happens happens to the chain? It is not that the living Holy Spirit has disappeared but the living Apostles have, so where does that leave Signs and Wonders which are signs of the Apostles (and not signs of the Gospel as such) and where does it leave tongues and new revelation?

I came to see early Christian ministries in terms of a bicycle wheel, with the hub being the living Apostleship at the centre holding all the spokes in place. Things inevitably had to change and when we turn to the later letters to Timothy we seem to enter another world. Here times have changed – the older generation is passing away and the baton and the deposit of faith are being handed to the next generation. The remaining Apostles are, like Paul himself, getting old, and the Apostolic Age will effectively be over by the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 69/70 AD. Each new generation will be closer to the same situation we find ourselves in nearly 2000 years later because they, like us, were now dependent on the early records of the Apostles. The living voice of the first witnesses was falling silent. When the younger man Timothy (already a 40 year old) is told to find and appoint future leaders, they are going to be people who have learnt the Gospel second and third and fourth hand, and a careful reading of Paul's letters to him will show that no signs and wonders, no tongues or prophecy or any form of new revelation is expected or required from Timothy as their leader or from the new recruits as they fulfil their ministries. They, like us today, will increasingly have a faith which is based on documents – the written records of the Apostles.

It remains for us to take the primacy of the Apostles seriously – they are a major part of God's wonderful gift to us. When we read the NT we should always take careful note of the context and give respect and honour to the people who appear in the stories we are reading. The Apostles were and remain important and we owe them so much, so let us recognise this and give thanks for them.

See further: Essay 3 A on Evangelism and Essay 10 on the various Generations of the Faithful in the NT

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