

Harvest Christian Fellowship
January 29, 2012
Theology @ 9
Facilitator: Wes Loveday

APOSTLES

Jesus' Representatives Exercised His Authority

Growing up in church, I often heard the term "apostle". However, I never really gave it much thought other than to wonder why guys in the Bible were called "disciples" sometimes and "apostles" other times; or to be curious when I would be in the Baptist bookstore and see books authored by some type of spiritual leader who would be called "Apostle so-and-so" – why isn't he "Pastor so-and-so" or just plain "so-and-so"?

This morning, we will give the topic of apostles some concentrated thought – with the intent of understanding what the apostles were, what role they played in the early church, and what role they play in the modern church.

Definition

The Greek word *apostolos*, which is translated "apostle", carries the meaning of "emissary", "delegate", "ambassador". 2 aspects are intended within this meaning:

1. The person is sent out on a mission or for a purpose
2. The person is sent in the full authority of the one who sends him – showing he is given full right and power to be the sender's representative

The term can be used in a generic sense of being a representative/messenger of most anything, but is most often used in the Bible in the specific context of being representatives/messengers of Jesus Christ. Our discussion will focus on the latter usage.

Qualifications for being an apostle

The idea of an apostle being one who has been given full authority to represent Christ implies that not everyone was or could be an apostle; that it was indeed a unique office and title. So what distinguished one in this way? Our best and most direct defining of the office comes from Acts 1:15-23, where the 11 disciples (who were also apostles) were in the process of replacing Judas in the apostolic ministry after his betrayal of Jesus. Beginning in verse 21, Peter lays out the necessary qualifications a man must have in order to be considered as a viable candidate to take Judas' place as an apostle:

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.

Acts 1:21-22 (NIV, 1984 edition)

From this text, we see 2 things that are essential in regard to identifying one as an apostle: one must have been with them the whole time, and he must be a witness to the resurrection. Though it comes second in Peter's instructions, being a witness to the resurrection is the most widely recognized and emphasized qualification, so we will begin there.

Being a witness to the resurrection

- Means literally to have seen the resurrected Jesus, not just to believe He was raised
- Inherent in having seen Jesus alive after His crucifixion was Jesus' choice to show Himself to the person
- *Acts 1:1-3a – In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit **to the apostles He had chosen. After His suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.***
- These men had eye-witness, first-hand assurance that the miraculous had taken place – Jesus had been raised from the dead
- This resurrection was God's personal testimony to the uniqueness of Jesus
 - confirmed Him as Lord and Christ
 - validated His teachings as authoritatively from/of God Himself

Having been with them the whole time

- "them" = "us" in verse 21 and refers to the 11 or 12 disciples and the closest followers of Jesus
- Implies an intimate association with the ministry and thus with Jesus, and/or a definite identifying of oneself with the ministry and thus with Jesus
- Full exposure to the teachings and deeds of Jesus

There is a third qualification that is implied within the other 2 and within the definition of an apostle itself. And that is this:

To be an apostle, one must be chosen/appointed for that role directly by Christ Himself

- *Acts 1:1-3a – In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit **to the apostles He had chosen. After His suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.***
- *Acts 1:24-25 – Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs".*
- *Mark 3:13-15 – Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him. He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.*
- This title or its authority is not something a man may confer upon himself, or even that the church can assign to him

It is worth noting the case of Paul, commissioned as the “apostle to the Gentiles”. He didn’t meet the qualifications set out by Peter – he was not with them from the beginning, and he was not one which the Lord appeared to during the 40 days between the resurrection and ascension. Yet, he very definitely was chosen and appointed directly by Christ to be His witness to the Gentiles.

Acts 9:1-20, Galatians 2:7-9, 1 Corinthians 15:3-10a

Understanding the God-ordained requirements concerning apostleship, we can safely draw a couple of conclusions which might be helpful:

- An apostle and a disciple are not the same thing. A disciple is a “learner”, “pupil”, “follower”. Anyone in Christ is a disciple – we are disciples – but not all of Jesus’ followers were called as an apostle or given the authority that the designated apostles were given. All of the apostles were disciples, but not all of the disciples were apostles.
- There are no apostles now. In fact, there is no evidence of apostleship after Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. This stands to reason if we consider the qualifications discussed earlier as valid: no one now has been an eyewitness to the resurrection. Also, there is no new revelation being given, and thus no need of a person such as an apostle to have authority to preserve, spread, and validate such revelation (this will be clearer as we consider the apostles’ authority and role, as well as the role of the Scripture).

Apostolic authority

We earlier defined an apostle as one who was fully authorized to represent someone. In terms of the big story of the Bible – that God has declared Jesus both Messiah and Lord, making Him the means of both forgiveness of sins for all would put their faith in Him, and judgment for all who would not believe on His name; and that all of that works to the end of God being glorified over all the earth – the apostles of Jesus Christ were sent to represent Him and this message to everyone. Since all of life, both here and eternity, revolved around Jesus, then His ambassadors were to make sure everyone knew that and how to follow Him. It is obvious how important an accurate telling of the message would be, and who could give a more trustworthy account than those who had unique, first-hand exposure to the message and to Him whom the message was about? They simply were heralding what God had directly given them. Hence they had authority because they had accuracy and thoroughness that nobody else could claim – all grounded, of course, in God’s choosing to reveal Himself to them in this way.

This authority from God was attested to and validated by God through “wonders and miraculous signs” – done both by the apostles (Acts 2:43, 5:12), and on the apostles’ behalf (Acts 5:17-19, Acts 12:5-11, Acts 16:16-28). Thus, to reject the apostles’ authoritative message was to reject the subject of the message, Jesus – ultimately rejecting God Himself (Luke 10:16).

That the church recognized this authority can be seen in the fact that it devoted itself (grounded itself in, did not neglect, gave intentional attention and credence) to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

Role of the apostles

The role that the apostles played came directly from their choosing by Christ and the authority that He gave them in this choosing – they were to be His representatives, or His “witnesses” as they are specifically delineated by Jesus at the end of the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Acts 1:1-8 is the definitive passage on the role of the apostles:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen. After His suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”...“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

At this point, one might wonder again what the difference is between the apostles and the church/body of disciples – after all, isn't the Great Commission and Acts 1:1-8 given to the church as well; aren't the role the apostles played and the role the church played/plays synonymous? Yes and no. Let's look at how the apostles and the church interconnect.

While the Great Commission is applied to Christians today, as it rightly should be, it was given first of all to the apostles. Remember what we have already talked about concerning what was unique about the apostles; and tie that into the fact that Christianity – the spreading of its message and the building of the church (those who would accept the message, Acts 2:41) - was in its infancy. Thus...

- In the beginning stages, Christ chose a select few to directly and intimately share His message with
- These then had first-hand, reliable information
- They were the initial agent of spreading the message
- They were the bottom-line earthly authorities and guardians in regard to what was of God or not, and what was true to the message or not

As the recognized witnesses, the apostles spread the message of Christ most directly through public preaching and personal evangelism. But as the message spread and the church kept growing, need arose for the apostles to multiply their influence and witness-bearing:

- They appointed elders in each church
 - *Acts 14:23 – Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*

- The elders were to shepherd and oversee the flock/church – through love and ministry, but first of all by preserving the message as it had been given and teaching the people the same
- The elders would then pass on the teaching to other trustworthy men
 - *2 Timothy 1:8-13 and 2:2*
 - “entrusting” and “reliable” imply that these men will also preserve the message as Christ gave it
 - So you see the message and its fruit multiplying – God to Christ, Christ to apostles, apostles to elders, elders to others of strong character, and then the whole of the church equipped to bear witness (*Ephesians 4:11-13*)

So while there is definitely a connection between the work and authority of the apostles and the work and authority of the church today, don't be confused.

- There are no uniquely authorized individuals today – there is no one with special revelation from God nor secret insight from God
- All revelation and resultant authority are contained within the Holy Scripture, with a large portion of the NT being the teachings/writings of the apostles
- the church carries on the work of the apostles in the progression of God's eternal purpose, bearing witnesses as the body of Christ – devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching as one of the primary pillars of what it means to be the church
- the Holy Spirit superintended the process of collecting the authoritative teaching into what we call the Bible, and now illumines and validates the truth of that same message in the hearts of man
- In short, we, and the universal church, ground ourselves in the message initially circulated by the ones whom Christ Himself had first passed it along to
- All of that ultimately points back to the grace of God in revealing Himself to man, and faithfully preserving this revelation throughout history – so that in “devoting ourselves to the apostles' teachings”, we are really rooting ourselves in God

Sources Consulted:

Concise Theology by J.I. Packer

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem