

Future Challenges

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For today's church to move into the unity and authority essential to authentic Christianity, then there are issues the apostles and prophets must face together without any 'fudging'. Paul said that the God ordained revelation of his purpose – which had been a mystery to previous generations – had now been revealed to and stewarded by apostles and prophets. This gives great privilege, and great responsibility to these people.

For apostolic ministries to move around like separate planets in orbit is totally unacceptable. They must fellowship, interact, pray, dialogue, prophesy in moving together. This enables the members of various apostolic companies to find themselves in relation to each other, and is essential to understanding and appreciating each other's gift and the pursuit of each other's commission. In this way friendship - as opposed to merely being colleagues - develops in a context of trust, understanding, and mutual love for each other in Christ. Such fellowship will provide a forum for the apostles to address issues, dialogue and debate face-to-face some of the most urgent or contentious ones, some of which I outline here:

Q. To whom are Apostles accountable? – In this generation of such lack of integrity it is vital for God's servants to avoid all appearance of evil. We should therefore welcome the biblical principle of accountability, but to whom are apostles accountable? Are they accountable to the church that separated them to their commission?

In my opinion the bible clearly teaches that the apostles were first and foremost accountable to Christ the Chief Apostle who had given them their commission. Paul's description of that commission received on the Damascus Road as a 'vision' to which he had not been disobedient (Acts 26:19) was an expression of his confidence that when standing before the Chief Apostle and held accountable for his stewardship he had performed well. Paul felt that under Christ his submission and accountability was to his fellow apostles. They understood the nature and demands of the apostolic calling; consequently they were best positioned to evaluate another's apostolic ministry, its account and fruit.

Paul's personal confrontation with Peter in Galatia highlights the fact that he at least felt that it was his prerogative to bring correction to Peter who was seen as one of the chief apostles in Jerusalem.

Paul's further reference is to his having gone up to Jerusalem to make known his gospel lest he had run in vain (Gal.2:2) and his declaration that on a visit to Jerusalem he had received the right hand of fellowship from the other apostles. On the wider front Paul exhorted the churches to prove all things (1 Thes.5:21) as well as commended the church at Ephesus (Rev.2:2) for having examined those who claimed to be apostles and proved them not to be is a clear indication that Paul saw his accountability also to the Body of Christ expressed in the congregations he gathered inside his sphere of influence.

His return to Antioch on completing the first phase of his apostolic commission (ref) and his reporting to that church is also indicative that he felt an accountability to submit his report to the church that had been used by the Spirit to send him out. Obviously an apostles' sense of accountability changes in keeping with the changes of the circumstances in the churches. That is why I would conclude that after Christ the Chief Apostle an apostle's primary submission to authority and accountability for life and ministry is to his fellow apostles.

For apostles to have a forum in which debate and discussion on issues affecting the body of Christ at large can be considered and adjudged, then it is important that together they determine a set of principles governing such debate.

Any forum allowing for strong debate between apostles must be provided in such a way that no one feels threatened. All participants should be able to express their convictions without fearing the reprisal of isolation, either personally or in ministry. We should be able to engage in strong debate – as did the early church (Acts 15:6-12) - and still emerge intact from the process, strengthened in our fellowship together and at one in the decision made. In this way apostolic counsel together is constructive, rather than destructive for the churches.

It is important that before such a forum or college of apostles can consider issues affecting each other or the churches inside their respective spheres of influence, agreements is reached as to the extent any decision – reached by such a body of apostles – is binding or authoritative on any apostle who may still be at variance with the majority in their thinking? If it carries no ruling authority, then the apostolic body is consultative, rather than authoritative. Although this in itself is welcome progress it does in my opinion fall short of the measures that are required to bring the churches to maturity in unity.

Q. What is the measure of authority an apostle carries to a church?

His authority extends to all things necessary to the achieving, maintaining and completing of his apostolic commission. It was this achieving that sustained Paul in his ministry. [1] He saw his own apostleship in keeping with the other ministry gifts to the church as working together to secure this end. [2] In particular he had the apostolic authority to steward the mysteries of God, [3] and lay a firm/good foundation of the church .[4]

Paul's defence of his apostleship was not to secure status but to make sure he could function with the authority that would enable him to fulfil his commission. Paul was not laying claim to something beyond himself, but rather showing the necessary determination to stand in his place for the sake of the church. [5] He defended his apostleship by directing their attention to themselves as the seal of it. [6] And to the fact that although he had privileges and rights that he could lay claim to inside his apostleship, he did not use these rights in order to secure a greater gain. [7] At no time was ownership in view, but rather stewardship.

Q. Does an apostle have authority over every church, even if he had not established its foundation?

Although Paul recognised God as having called and commissioned him as an apostle and this is not in question, he makes it clear that the authority he had received could only function rightfully and effectively inside the boundaries of his apostolic commission.

We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. (2 Cor.10:13-14)

It is important therefore, as apostles, that we recognise the 'limits' to our authority, and that we acknowledge and respect the work of others over which we have no authority but which work is legitimate nevertheless.

Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. . . . For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory. 2 Cor.10:15-16 [8]

The apostle's calling is directly from God in a revelation and commissioning from the Living Christ. To Paul his apostleship and authority were intrinsically joined in a common purpose. God as the source of his commissioning was also the source from whom he received authority to fulfil his commission.

*For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.
2 Cor 10:8*

Paul expected the churches within the bounds of his authority to receive this readily rather than reluctantly.

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. 1 Cor 14:37-38

The words he used to reinforce his teaching affirm this.

*Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.
1 Cor.7:17*

Q. Does an apostle always need to emphasise his authority?

No, for although Paul linked the authority in his calling as giving him the right to exert his personal influence where necessary, he chose a better way than that of pressing his rights.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. 1 Thes.2:6,7

Examples of this are Paul's use of the word *parakaleo* which is an appeal by one who has the authority to command but the tact not to. [9]

Another word Paul uses is *erotao*, this word is generally used as a request between equals. [10] These ways of appealing and requesting by Paul are in keeping with his conviction that the better way to pursue his objective was not to behave in any way that left him open to the accusation of authoritarianism. On the contrary, Paul states very clearly his heart was not to appeal to the authority of God in bringing them counsel or command, but to work with them to the realisation of their common goals.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. 2 Cor. 1:24

Paul exercised his apostolic authority in a warm and intimate manner, much as a nursing mother or as a father.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. 1 Th 2:6,7 [11]

And

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 1 Th 2:11,12 [12]

Q. **Could this eventually weaken apostolic authority?**

The fact Paul chose to operate this way did not mean that he was weak in his exercise of authority, he recognised that sometimes his authority would have to be used as 'a rod' or 'whip' - much against his desire:

What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit? 1 Cor.4:21

And that he would sometimes need to 'be harsh in my use of authority' in keeping with his objectives. (2 Cor.13:10)

When leadership in a church failed to exercise authority Paul made clear the extent of his authority to bring a judgement and his expectation of its implementation. [\[13\]](#)

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 1 Cor.5:3-5

These statements show that he was not afraid to use his authority, however, Paul was anxious at all times that they understand the heart behind the action, which is why he conjoined both command and request in addressing the Thessalonians. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. 2 Thes.3:12

Q. **How do apostles function towards churches that**

are in denominational settings, and therefore under an existing authority?

2000 years have passed since those early apostles gave us the New Testament moved amongst the churches. The religious landscape is completely different. We are not confronted with the singular divide between Jew and Gentile, but with untold thousands of denominational divisions as well as thousands of expressions of the independent heart of man.

Q. **How can apostles function towards a fully autonomous local church?**

I can only respond in the light of my understanding of the use of the term “autonomy” amongst local churches, since autonomy means self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating, this effectively – in practice – makes each local expression of the church the whole!! If each church is totally autonomous, where does that leave an apostolic judgement, such as the one that took place in the early church over the issue of circumcision? If such a decision was not binding on elders of autonomous churches, we are forced to ask what authority did the apostolic council actually have?

The depth of relationship and unity between churches shows us in the situation where Paul called for a man to be excommunicated from the church in Corinth for his immoral lifestyle with his stepmother (1Co 5:1-5), he did so with a confidence that there was nowhere else the man could go. Paul did not feel each congregation was an ‘autonomous’ church. Paul knew there was no haven for him inside the body of Christ; therefore for Paul, this action was the last effort to save the man. Paul’s second letter to Corinth gives us the result of this action: the man, having no place of entry to the body of Christ, repented. Paul then urged the church to receive him back into fellowship (2Co 2:5-11).

It is a scandal of our time that people placed under discipline in one church can merely drive half a mile, or cross the road, and be received readily by the elders of another church? The whole purpose of God’s restoration of apostles and prophets is to bring the church from its present abnormal condition into fullness in Christ. That means that we learn to deal effectively with the situations I have just described.

Q. **Does apostolic authority continue to a church after elders have been appointed?**

Some people assert that when apostles have laid the foundation of a church and appointed elders their authoritative function ceases towards that church, that all authority now lies with local eldership - but does the bible teach this?

What the scriptures show us is that with the appointment of elders the apostle is not made redundant but re-positioned in his function to the church. The apostolic task is now continued through the eldership, not separate from but in partnership with the apostles.

Paul's pastoral epistles are examples of continuing apostolic authority since they contain many commands, not simply counsel. (Titus 2:7,8; 2 Thes.3:12)

It is also borne out in Paul's unilateral decisions on the affairs in the Corinthian church. Here the failure of local leadership to deal with matters of immorality, lascivious behaviour, abuse of spiritual gifts and other such ills, meant that to Paul the essential nature and practice of the gospel was under threat. Paul therefore felt the necessity to intervene but did so in the full knowledge that he had the apostolic authority to do it (1 Cor.5).

Consider John and Diotrophes where John found himself shut out from the church by an ambitious leader with ungodly lust for power/status who was damaging the church. John was clear he had the authority and responsibility to take what action he could however limited the scope (3 Joh.9-11).

Paul gives an example of partnership in the letter to the Colossians where Epaphrus is seen as having filled out the essence of the apostolic gospel on Paul's behalf (Col.1:7).

Paul giving a charge to an existing eldership (Acts 20:28)

Q. **How do apostles and elders maintain their authority in the churches?**

In order to maintain ones authority it is essential that whether apostle or elder we:

- Maintain credibility in testimony,
- Integrity in life,
- Consistency in word and action.

In this way we are able to strengthen our authority where required by an appeal to what they know us to be.

We must accept that the absence of an apostle from a church over a prolonged period of time will weaken the people's sense of his importance and heart for them. It is in such instances that the enemy sows bad seed in vulnerable minds. This undesirable situation can be avoided, to some extent, by the existing eldership maintaining the apostolic presence in the heart of the people by:

- Their honouring of them,[14]
- Encouraging the people to pray for them,[15]
- Sending to enquire of their welfare,
- Liberally giving to them. [16]

In this way the apostles do not become strangers with the passage of time, but looked for with longing and received with great joy when they come.

On the other hand, when unable to visit over a long period the apostles can help maintain the consciousness of their presence in the church, by sending other ministries to bring news of the apostle, his welfare, heart, and labours, and his strong desire to be with them.

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. Phil.2:19

Which in turn not only strengthens the links with the apostles but strengthens the authority of the apostolic representative. (In this case Timothy)

If an apostle is aware that a church(es) needs to know his thinking in important matters, he should send someone who can adequately represent his mind and heart on the issues. Where it is not possible to send someone, the apostle should send a letter to the eldership, as Paul did. (Pastoral Epistles)

Q. Can a person refuse an apostle's command without being in rebellion?

First let us draw a distinction between command and apostolic authority. As we have already highlighted there are limits inside which an apostle works. The limits, or boundaries, of his commission are also the limits and boundaries of his authority. He may command beyond his boundary but he will not have authority beyond his boundary, and therefore those refusing his commands are not necessarily rebelling against his authority. For his authority only operates within the boundary of his commission.

For example, if an apostle visits a church that is not inside his apostolic sphere of authority the elders are not under obligation to obey a command this apostle might bring if it is likely to affect the foundation or direction already received

through the apostleship inside whose sphere of authority they are functioning. [17]

Then again there are other circumstances in which people may refuse an apostolic directive:

- Where it is calling for an endorsement of or involvement in unrighteousness or injustice.
- Where it is demanding beyond your faith.
- Where it is demanding beyond your ability.
- Where it could be destructive to your family/life when you are already ordering it by the highest authority of God's world.
- Where it would damage the church you are part of.
- Where it demands you speak or act beyond your own authority.
- Where it is clearly contrary to the word of God.
- Where it would leave you with a bad conscience.

These are not excuses but if proffered as reasons must be substantiated. It is essential that where you feel it necessary to refuse apostolic command you display a right attitude and seek to reason appropriately as to why you cannot follow this command.

You can demonstrate this by:

- In honesty confronting
- In truth give reason
- In firmness refuse
- In meekness entreat
- In love pray

Appeal to the apostles and elders to resolve the dispute much as the gentile churches did over circumcision and again that of the Hellenistic widows, [18] and Paul's use of his Roman citizenship [19].

Q. **How do the apostles and elders relate together?**

The New Testament throws considerable light on the relationship between the apostles and local eldership.

They have deep love and respect for each other (Acts 20:17-38)

In what was to prove the final meeting of Paul with the Ephesian elders, we have a wonderful example of the depth of friendship and joy they had in their relationship together. He was able to remind them of:

- His example of life and commitment to truth in them (v.18-20)

- Of faithfulness to his mission to Gentiles as well as Jews and his example of continuing commitment to the direction of the Spirit (v.21-23)
- His commitment to complete his apostolic mandate received from the Lord (v.24)
- The diligence with which he had laid the foundation in their own lives and continuing desire to even now impart to them instruction that would enable them to succeed in their eldership (v.27-31)
- His confidence in committing them to God's grace as both able to keep and upbuild them, opening a wide door into all God's inheritance for them (v.32)
- His example of rejecting or personal gain by selflessly serving them (v.33-36)
- The tremendous bonds of love and affection in their fellowship in (v.36-38).
- They are partners in the gospel (Phil.4:15,16)
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They showed themselves totally in partnership with Paul by sending Epaphroditus to know Paul's needs in order to minister encouragingly to him. (Phil.2:25)
Paul frequently uses the term 'fellow worker' for someone labouring with him in the work of the gospel. For example, Philemon 24 says, 'And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.'

This idea of partnership is explicitly used in reference to Titus: 'As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you'. (2 Cor.8:23)

This language shows that the apostles and all other ministries including elders are not in a competitive or antagonist relationship. Instead, they are working together, pursuing a common cause, side by side.

Also, Paul writes to the Philippians extending the concept to include the whole church as it stood with him financially, 'I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now'. (Phil.1:4-5) Although they ministered financially to Paul. Paul did not take advantage of this, he made clear to them that he had learnt to be content in whatever circumstance of life he found himself (Phil.4:10-13). Yet he was thrilled by their partnership with him in their supply of his needs (Phil.4:14-18), knowing that this would in turn release the blessing and favour of God towards them (Phil.4:19).

The releasing by the elders at Lystra and Iconium of Timothy at Paul's request, displayed the elders' readiness to actively participate in his apostolic commission (Acts 16:1-3). The same is true of the elders of Rome who, although it was not a church that had been established by Paul, they nevertheless held his apostleship in such high regard that they were only too willing to release people to help Paul achieve his objectives (Rom.16).

The Apostles use this basis of partnership to bring a word of instruction without wielding their authority.

Therefore, Peter can write, 'To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder . . .' (1 Pet.5:1). Likewise, Paul says, 'So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.' (Phil.17)

There is co-operation not competition between apostles and elders.

Here are some examples of their partnership working in practice:

- Deciding on a theological dispute at the Council of Jerusalem 'The apostles and elders met to consider this question'. (Acts 15:6)
- 'As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.' (Acts 16:4) [20]
- The co-ordination and stewardship of projects which reach beyond the sphere of one congregation.
- 'The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.' (Acts 11:29-30)

An illustration of the way in which partnership was in the very fabric of the apostolic life comes in the language of Titus 2:7-8:

'In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.'

There is a strong mutual trust between the apostles and elders (Acts 11:30) One of the most impressive elements in the NT of the relationship between apostles and elders is that of the mutual trust between each other. This is evidenced by the readiness of the elders to commit large sums of money to the apostles. This was done with the offering received in Corinth and elsewhere (2 Cor.8:1-21). It was a visible sign of the continuing trust in the apostles, which was first seen following Pentecost (Acts 4:34-37). On the other hand the apostles displayed their confidence in the local eldership by giving them the large sums of money received in offerings to disperse as they felt right in the community of believers and beyond in good works amongst the needy. (Acts 11:30)

Q. How do elders continue the apostolic mission in a church?

As one has already indicated, the appointment of elders does not mean the apostolic ministry is now dispensable. On the contrary, the elders continued working in partnership with the apostles as an extension and continuation of the apostolic burden and gospel amongst the people (Acts 14:23). This was done in the following ways:

- Continuing to unfold Christ to the people (Acts 20:27).
- Continuing the ministry of Christ in and through the local community.
- As Shepherd teachers. Discipling the local community in the implications of this in day to day living, within the world, Christian community, the family and the individual. (Titus 1:7-9)
- Continuing to bring understanding of the purpose of God in and through his people. (Eph.1:18-23) This entails instruction in God's mandate for man as the visible fullness of the invisible God. (Col.1:28)
- Inspiring the people in their enjoyment of God, and thus motivating them to communicate their gospel faithfully to others. (1 Thes.1:6-10)
- Continuing to oversee the people (as the flock of God (Acts 20:28) and as overseers to acquaint the apostles about individuals that could be a great blessing in the continued expansion of the kingdom and the fulfilling of the apostolic commission. As the elders at Lystra and Iconium did about Timothy to Paul (Acts 16:1-2)

Q. Discipline of apostles – who is empowered to enact discipline on an apostle?

Although one would hope that discipline of an apostle never becomes a necessity and therefore it is not a probability, it does not mean that it is outside the boundary of possibility. Obviously disciplinary action should first come from those to whom the apostle is directly accountable under Christ, which are his fellow apostles. All discipline is for restoration not destruction. However, this does not mean that a fallen apostle can expect to be automatically reinstated to his former place of ministry. Restoration of fellowship does not mean automatic reinstatement of ministerial position.

Q. What is the way forward today in the recovery of apostolic ministry?

Paul's eschatological view of the move of God's Spirit is to bring all things into order and unity under Christ's headship universally. Therefore surely an effort should be made to provide an international forum of apostles and prophets to gather and share further on these issues. In this way we are declaring that the apostles of Christ in the third and fourth worlds are not in any way inferior to the apostles of the so-called first world. One example of the imperative need for this is seen in the increasing disarray through competition between western groups trying to establish themselves in post-Communist Russia. Will this tragedy repeat itself shortly in a newly opened China?

It is the readiness to face difficult issues, our commitment to help such a forum as is outlined above come about. Our intercession and prayer for each other, that tells whether we are serious in our pursuit of God's purpose as restorers in our generation, or merely playing religious chess. There is no value in continually telling the people of God about the latest "now word" or the latest "now revelation" if we're not committed to essential 'now' changes. There are changes we know must take place in ourselves as we see this revelation and word walked through to where it is part and parcel of our own lives first, and then in the life of the community of God – NOW.

[1] Col. 1:28 - 2:3

[2] Eph.4:11-13

[3] 1 Cor.4:1

[4] 1 Cor.3:10

[5] 1 Cor.7:17

[6] 1 Cor.9:2

[7] 2 Cor.9:3-23

[8] Note with reference to the Council on circumcision at Jerusalem, that the letter the apostles and elders sent to the gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Silicia, begins with these words: 'Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.' Acts 15:23,24

Both apostles and elders were agreed that the actions of these wandering teachers without authorisation, meant that they were teaching without authority.

[9] Romans 16:17; 1 Cor.1:10; 4:16; 16:15; 2 Cor. 2:8; 6:1; 10:1;12:18; Eph.4:1; Phil.4:2; 1Thes. 5:14; Phil 9,10.

[10] Phil.4:3; 1 Thes.4:1;5:12; 2 Thes.2:1

[11] cf. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you Gal 4:19

[12]cf. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel 1 Cor 4:15.

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. 2 Cor 12:14

[13] 2 Thes. 3:6-15; 1 Cor. 5:3-5; 2 Cor.2:5-11; 7:9-13

[14] Gal.4:15

[15] 1 Thes.5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1, Heb.13:18

[16] Phil.4:14-19

[17] Gal.1:7,9

[18] Acts 15:2; 6:1-6

[19] Acts 16:37,38

[20] This is a clear indication of the absence of the concept of local church autonomy amongst the apostles and elders in the early church.

