

DOES THE GIFT OF APOSTLESHIP CONTINUE?

Our triune God did not leave the worldwide mission of making and maturing disciples (Matt. 28:19-20) to untrained, ill-equipped incompetents. He personally called and commissioned apostles [“the eleven disciples” (v. 16)] to launch His mission. He personally called specific men from among those He had redeemed. He personally commissioned those He called. He personally trained and equipped the ones He commissioned.

His mission continues; its success is guaranteed (Matt. 16:18). Today He saves, indwells, and gifts every believer to be a fully functioning member of Christ’s body—the church. From beginning to end, God’s worldwide mission was, is, and will be a Hands-on enterprise.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS DEFINED

Spiritual gifts are one of the key elements in the church’s success. Spiritual gifts are necessary for the church to accomplish its mission. The Holy Spirit, therefore, gives a spiritual gift to each believer. The gifts are distributed sovereignly. After listing nine spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, Paul states, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills” (v. 11). Unbelievers, as well as believers, have natural talents, skills, and abilities. Only Christians have spiritual gifts.

A spiritual gift can be defined as *a capacity for ministry given to all believers by God's grace at their new birth, which enables them to take their place in Christ's body as functioning members*.¹ The definition points to seven realities about spiritual gifts.

First, a spiritual gift is a capacity. Gifts give us the potential to perform a certain ministry, but only the potential. Gifts do not automatically function. One may abuse, refuse to use, or effectively use his or her gift. "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32).²

Second, a spiritual gift is a capacity for ministry, which points to the purpose of spiritual gifts. While gifts have personal benefits, their chief end is the good of Christ's body, not personal glory or gratification. "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all" (1 Cor. 12:7).

Third, gifts are given to all believers—male and female, slave and free, Jew and gentile. No believer is ungifted. "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one . . ." (1 Cor. 12:7; see also 1 Peter 4:10). "Paul taught that each Christian was given some manifestation of the Spirit. In God's family of grace none is left out. Everyone is important. Each has been gifted to accomplish some necessary ministry."³

Fourth, God gives the gifts. Christians do not select their gift or gifts. "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills" (1 Cor. 12:11). "The emphasis falls on the sovereignty of the Giver and reminds us that the possession of

¹Timothy Keith Christian, "A Pastor and Church Using Spiritual Gifts to Focus Ministry" (D. Min. project, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993), 5.

²Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from *The New King James Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

³J. W. MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 31.

any one of the gifts cannot be used as an argument that one individual is more spiritual than another.”⁴

Fifth, God’s gifts are given by grace. They are neither earned nor deserved, as emphasized by the Greek word most often used for spiritual gifts: *charisma*. “In the New Testament, the term is found sixteen times in the Pauline writings, and once in Peter (1 Peter 4:10). Clearly cognate with *charis* (grace), at its simplest it refers to something grace has bestowed, a ‘grace-gift’ if you will.”⁵

Sixth, each believer receives his or her spiritual gift(s) at salvation.⁶ The Bible does not state when gifts are given, but the conclusion is based on a certainty: Paul addressed the Corinthian believers as all being gifted. He did not say some have spiritual gifts now and others will receive them later. Every believer is indwelt by the Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and gifted by the Spirit. Referring to spiritual gifts, Paul stated, “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one [*pros hekastō*, “to each one separately”⁷] . . . for to one is given [a specific gift] . . . through the same Spirit, to another [a particular gift] to another [a gift] . . . by the same Spirit, to another [a different gift] . . . to another [a gift] . . . distributing to each one [*hekastō*] individually as He wills” (1 Cor. 12:7-11). Peter adds, “As each one [*hekastos*] has received a gift, minister it to one another” (1 Peter 4:10). Since you all have a gift, use it.

⁴Kenneth S. Hemphill, *Spiritual Gifts Empowering the New Testament Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 62.

⁵D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 19.

⁶William McRae, *Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 35-36.

⁷Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), s.v., “*hékastos*.”

Gifts are diverse. They may lie dormant for a period of time. Spiritual growth may lead to the discovery and use of a gift months or years after salvation, but it appears certain that they are distributed to each and every believer at the moment of salvation.

Seventh, spiritual gifts empower all believers to become functioning members of Christ's body. "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Rom. 12:4-5).

A spiritual gift is a capacity for ministry given by God's grace to all believers at salvation, which enables them to take their places in Christ's body as functioning members.

IS APOSTLESHIP A GIFT?

The title of this article, "DOES THE GIFT OF APOSTLESHIP CONTINUE?" makes an assumption: "apostleship" was or is a spiritual gift. Some disagree.

Doubt

Jack Deere, for example, states, "In the New Testament an apostle is not a spiritual gift but a person who had a divinely given commission and ministry."⁸ Likewise, C. Samuel Storms challenges, "But is apostleship a spiritual gift? Exhorters exhort, teachers teach, healers heal, those who have the gift of faith exercise extraordinary faith, and so on. But how does an 'apostle' (noun) 'apostle' (verb)?"⁹

Affirmation

⁸Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993), 242.

⁹C. Samuel Storms, "A Third Wave Response to Robert L. Saucy," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, gen. ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 156.

Robert L. Saucy, in contrast, believes apostleship is a spiritual gift. He notes:

The manner in which the apostles are mentioned in the discussion of spiritual gifts, however, suggests that their ministry was something more than simply a combination of other gifts. They are listed along with “prophets” and “teachers,” who all agree were individuals who regularly exercised the corresponding gifts of prophecy and teaching (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11). Even as prophets and teachers were such by corresponding spiritual gifts that they exercised, so were apostles. . . . Thus, while the apostles exercised various gifts common to others (such as prophecy and teaching), they were also endowed with a unique spiritual gift that enabled them to minister as apostles.¹⁰

Paul emphasizes the diversity of spiritual gifts given to Christ’s body in 1 Corinthians 12. He lists eight of the gifts to illustrate his point. “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues” (v. 28). The first three are gifted people, ranked “first . . . second . . . third.” “Apostles” are ranked first in the list. Gordon D. Fee notes that the ranking indicates “one has precedence over the other in the founding and building up of the local assembly.”¹¹

Paul also speaks of gifted men given to the body of Christ “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Again, “apostles” head the list. “And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (v. 11). Charles Hodge noted:

Every office necessarily supposes the corresponding gift. . . . Man may appoint men to offices for which they have not the necessary gifts, but God never does, any more than he ordains the foot to see or the hand to hear. If any man, therefore, claims to be an apostle, or prophet, or worker of miracles, without the corresponding gift, he is a false pretender.¹²

¹⁰Robert L. Saucy, “An Open But Cautious View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, gen. ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 101-102.

¹¹Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, gen. ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 620.

¹²Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 262.

The apostles were chosen and gifted by Jesus Christ. Apostles can be defined as “a unique group of men chosen by Christ to be witnesses of His resurrection. They were empowered to work miracles, which confirmed the authority of their words and writings.”¹³ The spiritual gift of “apostle” or “apostleship” enabled the apostles to accomplish their God-given ministry and mission.

The word *apostolēs*, translated “apostleship,” is used four times in the New Testament. Luke uses it once. Paul uses it three times. None of the uses are in the passages that list spiritual gifts, but they are significant texts for our discussion.

Luke mentioned apostleship in Acts 1. The 120 believers gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem sought God’s direction in choosing a replacement for Judas Iscariot. They prayed, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship (*apostolēs*)” (Acts 1:24-25). The context indicates the “ministry and apostleship” was chiefly being a witness of Jesus Christ’s resurrection (v. 22). Here we have a partial answer for Storm’s question, “How does an ‘apostle’ (noun) ‘apostle’ (verb)?” He proclaims his eyewitness testimony that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

Paul’s first mention of apostleship was in Romans 1:5. He said, “Through Him [Jesus Christ] we have received grace and apostleship (*apostolēv*) for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name.” Some suggest the “we” in Romans 1:5, indicates “apostleship” is used in a broader, less official sense, describing “anyone whom God has sent with the message of salvation.”¹⁴ Others understand “we” as a reference to “Paul and the other apostles. . . . Many

¹³Christian, 175-176.

¹⁴John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), 1691.

take ‘we’ as an editorial ‘we,’ but Paul, in writing to a church that others had founded, would have been sensitive to the fact that he was not alone in ministering to the Gentiles.”¹⁵

Since Paul was not one of the original twelve, he often defended his own apostleship. To his spiritual children in Corinth he wrote, “If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship (*apostolēs*) in the Lord” (1 Cor. 9:2). To the Galatians he added, “For He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship (*apostolēn*) to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:8).

The word translated “apostle” is masculine. The words translated “apostleship” (Acts 1:25; Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 9:2; Gal. 2:8) are feminine. Kittle noted, “In all cases it clearly refers to the office of the ἀπόστολος [*apostolos*] of Jesus, technically conceived and discharged.”¹⁶ The masculine form seems to emphasize the office they held. The feminine form seems to emphasize the work they performed.

The apostolic mission was performed via the gift of apostleship, making the apostles themselves gifts to the church. As Paul declared, “And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers; for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). The men and their ministries were dependent on God’s gift. Therefore, I conclude, apostleship is a spiritual gift.

APOSTLES CONTINUE

¹⁵Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary, vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 63.

¹⁶Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), s.v., “ἀποστολή.”

Most, though not all, evangelical writers who discuss the gift of apostleship recognize the New Testament apostles were unique. Some also speak of the gift in a secondary, unofficial sense.

Secondary Apostles

Leslie B. Flynn suggested the gift could be understood in two ways. Flynn stated:

Did the gift [of apostle] die out? Or is it a continuing gift today?

Perhaps the answer is “yes” to both questions, if *apostle* has a two-fold aspect. In its restricted usage, the office has finished; in its broader phase, the gift still functions. Officially, the apostolate ended with the apostles; unofficially, the apostolic gift persists to our day as the missionary gift.¹⁷

R. Wayne Jones agrees with Flynn. He summarizes, “The apostle Paul used the term *apostle* both in a restricted, official sense and in a broader, unofficial sense. . . . The word *apostle* means ‘one sent.’ Paul used the term in its larger sense to mean ‘messenger’ or ‘missionary.’”¹⁸

Ray C. Stedman and Rick Yohn held a similar view with a slight twist. Flynn and Jones emphasized the cross-cultural element of missionary work. Stedman and Yohn simply emphasized beginning new works, whether cross-cultural or not. Stedman declared:

The apostolic gift is still being given today, though in a secondary sense. There is no new truth to be added to the Scriptures, but the body of truth which we have is to be taken by those who have an apostolic gift and imparted to new churches wherever they may begin. It is part of the apostolic gift to start new churches. We call those who do this ‘pioneer missionaries’ today.¹⁹

Yohn agreed, adding that a pastor who has “the compulsion to be a ‘church planter.’ . . . should seriously consider the possibility that he may have the gift of apostle.”²⁰ Yohn did not limit apostleship to ordained ministers nor to church planting, however. He taught that the gift

¹⁷Leslie B. Flynn, *Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1974), 39.

¹⁸R. Wayne Jones, *Using Spiritual Gifts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 34.

¹⁹Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1972), 74.

²⁰Rick Yohn, *Discover Your Spiritual Gift and Use It* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1974), 53-54.

also included laymen who either start churches or any other kind of new ministry, including literature, radio, or television ministries.²¹

Flynn, Jones, Stedman, and Yohn based their understanding of the gift of apostle on the definition of an apostle as “one sent,” and, in part, upon the example of the missionary work of the apostle Paul as a transcultural church planter.²² They recognized the uniqueness of the first century apostles, but viewed the missionary, church planting, and entrepreneurial elements as a secondary function of post-New Testament apostleship.

More recently, the church planting movement has embraced the secondary function of post-New Testament apostleship. Bob Roberts Jr. states:

Apostolic is a term that people use a lot lately. Not to be confused with the original twelve apostles, the word simply refers to one who is “sent.” It’s the picture of sending others out to engage the world. Today, what I call *apostolic fathers* is simply the sending part of the church. These are the people who are entrepreneurs and highly visionary; they believe anything is possible, especially when others don’t. They are huge risk takers who not only see but begin moving toward that vision.

We need pastors who are apostolic—sending, leading by vision, enterprising, risk taking. An apostolic father is the kind of pastor who will wind up starting churches out of his church.²³

Likewise, Stetzer and Bird stated:

The meaning of the word apostolic is best defined as one who is “authoritatively sent.” We are sent to proclaim the Gospel from Christ, who, before giving the Great Commission, began by reminding his listeners, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go. . . . (Matthew 28:18-19, NIV). Jesus authoritatively sends us to proclaim the Gospel and reach people in the name of Christ, not to lord it over in new structures of church life. Some claiming to be “apostolic” focus on their authority, but our focus is on Christ’s authoritative commands to go and transform the world for the Gospel—in our church, community, and culture. . . . To be a biblical church means to be missionally engaged.

²¹Ibid., 54.

²²Flynn, 43-47; Jones, 34; Stedman, 74; Yohn, 52-53.

²³Bob Roberts, Jr., *The Multiplying Church: The New Math for Starting New Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 87.

The person with apostolic gifting doesn't just want to plant an individual church and be its pastor. That person wants to plant a movement.²⁴

Wayne Grudem acknowledged that some “use the word *apostle* in a very broad sense, to refer to an effective church planter, or to a significant missionary pioneer. . . . If we use the word *apostle* in the broad sense, everyone would agree that there are still apostles today—for there are certainly effective missionaries and church planters today.”²⁵ The broad sense is deduced from defining apostle “simply to mean *messenger (apostolos)*.”²⁶

The New Testament uses the word apostle in the broad sense three times. Addressing the church at Philippi, Paul called Epaphroditus “your *messenger (apostolos)*” (Phil. 2:25). Paul collected an offering for needy believers in Jerusalem. Those who delivered the offering were “*messengers [apostoloi]* of the churches” (2 Cor. 8:23). Jesus said, “Nor is *he who is sent [apostolos]* greater than he who sent him” (John 13:16).²⁷ Grudem notes:

But there is another senses for the word *apostle*. Much more frequently in the New Testament the word refers to a special office, “*apostle of Jesus Christ*.” In this narrow sense of the term, there are no more apostles today, and we are to expect no more. This is because of what the New Testament says about the qualifications for being an apostle and about who the apostles were.²⁸

Primary Apostles

One may justly ask, since the Bible does not give a specific definition of the spiritual gift of apostle or apostleship, and since three references use the broad sense of the word, does it really matter whether or not one believes in the continuation of some form of modern-day apostles. I believe it matters a great deal. As quoted above, Stetzer noted the tendency of “some

²⁴Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 19.

²⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 906.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

claiming to be ‘apostolic’ [to] focus on their authority” over the churches they plant. We can anticipate where the tendency will lead in the future. C. Peter Wagner’s progressive perspective is an example of the tendency to follow a definition to its natural conclusion.

In 1979, Wagner taught that God continues to give the gift of apostleship in the primary, narrow sense. He identified the gift as being present “in the person whom God has given especially to pastors and church leaders.”²⁹ Wagner explained:

He is the one to whom pastors and church leaders can go for counsel and help. He is a peacemaker, a troubleshooter and a problem solver. He can make demands that may sound autocratic but which are gladly accepted by Christian people because they recognize his gift and the authority it carries with it. He has the overall picture in focus and is not restricted in vision to the problems of one local church.³⁰

Wagner did not consider modern-day apostles as secondary to the first century apostles, nor did he list any biblical qualifications. He believed “the biblical evidence strongly supports the continuity of the gift. . . . The original 12 apostles have a unique place in Christian history and they will be commemorated permanently in the New Jerusalem (see Rev. 21:14), but they were not the only apostles.”³¹

Wagner identified five modern-day apostles, all of whom led churches in phenomenal growth.³² He explained, “This growth is due substantially to the apostolic gift that God has given

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 208.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 207.

³²Ibid., 210-11. The five are: Chuck Smith, Costa Mesa, CA; Manoel de Melo, Sao Paulo, Brazil; Javier Vasquez, Santiago, Chile; Cho Yonggi in Seoul, Korea; Robert Hymers, Westwood, CA. Wagner states: “Undoubtedly there are hundreds of others worldwide who should be recognized as such. This in turn might allow yet other hundreds to discover that they have the gift of apostle and see it confirmed by the Body of Christ.”

[them] . . . just as surely as the growth of the churches in first century Asia Minor were due to Paul's apostolic gift."³³

Wagner's understanding of apostleship explained in *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, published in 1979, was the foundation for the belief he embraced by 2000. In an interview with the "Generals of Intercession Newsletter," published January/February 2000, Wagner states:

Apostles are anointed by God to set the things of the body of Christ and the kingdom of God in order. For them to accomplish that, and for the rest of the church to accept their work, they need an incredible amount of authority. But that authority can only be an authority that God gives—not self-produced.³⁴

Wagner claimed the "incredible amount of God-given authority" for himself. He organized "The Apostolic Council of Prophetic Elders," which he described as "a peer-level group of prophets, now under my apostolic leadership."³⁵ He was also "the presiding apostle" of the "International Coalition of Apostles."³⁶ Wagner noted:

I have the advantage of being a horizontal apostle, and a horizontal apostle is one who can bring together vertical apostles, whereas it is very difficult for vertical apostles to call other vertical apostles together (note: vertical apostles are leaders of apostolic networks, whereas horizontal apostles are graced by God to give apostolic leadership and direction to certain spheres of the body of Christ as a whole).³⁷

Wagner believes it is vital for Christians and churches to recognize modern-day apostles and prophets. In fact, he believes God's future blessings on the church depend on it. He states:

I think one of the hindrances to God's sending the revival we've been praying for has been that the government of the church has not been properly in place. And now that the government of the church is coming into place, we are already seeing God trusting the body

³³Ibid., 210.

³⁴C. Peter Wagner, "Joining Forces Blazing Trails," interview by Cindy Jacobs. *Generals of Intercession Newsletter* (Jan./Feb. 2000, accessed 29 August 2002); available from <http://www.harvestnet.org/reports/aboutWagnerapostles.htm>; Internet.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

of Christ with things we were totally unaware of previous to this. Once the government comes into place, then God can do what he wants with the body of Christ, and one of the things most of us agree on is that He wants to send the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we would call the worldwide revival. So my commitment for the rest of my career is to use the gift God has given me to help the development of the worldwide New Apostolic Reformation. And this (linking of apostles and prophets) is an essential part!³⁸

The “International Coalition of Apostles” continues and is growing. Wagner stepped down from his position as Presiding Apostle on his 80th birthday in 2009. John P. Kelly now leads the organization as Convening Apostle. Their website declares:

The Second Apostolic Age began roughly in 2001, heralding the most radical change in the way church is done since the Protestant Reformation. This New Apostolic Reformation embraces the largest segment of non-Catholic Christianity worldwide and is the fastest growing. Churches of the Apostolic Movement embrace the only Christian mega block growing faster than Islam.³⁹

The website further states:

An apostle is defined by ICA as a Christian leader gifted, taught, commissioned, and sent by God with the authority to establish the foundational government of a church or business within an assigned sphere by hearing what the Holy Spirit is saying and one who sets things in order accordingly for the growth and maturity of the group or complex of groups (churches or businesses).

Since apostles operate in several different ways, ICA is open to “vertical apostles” (including ecclesiastical, functional, congregational, and team-member vertical apostles), to “horizontal apostles” (including convening, ambassadorial, mobilizing, and territorial horizontal apostles), and to different kinds of “marketplace apostles.”⁴⁰

The obvious question is, does the New Testament support such claims? Did the gift of apostleship continue in the church in the primary, official sense? If not, did it continue to our day in a secondary sense of cross-cultural missionary work, church planting, or beginning new ministries?

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹“Definition of ‘Apostle,’” (accessed 3 September 2013); available from <http://www.coalitionofapostles.com/about-ica/definition-of-apostle/>; Internet.

⁴⁰“About ICA,” (accessed 3 September 2013); available from <http://www.coalitionofapostles.com/about-ica/>; Internet.

THE TRANSITIONAL NATURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

The transitional nature of the New Testament period is an often overlooked element in the study of spiritual gifts in general, and the gift of apostleship in particular. Many have assumed all the historical, supernatural events of the New Testament are normative for all of church history.⁴¹ “The New Testament,” some say, “is not a record of what happened in one generation, but it is a blueprint of what should happen in every generation until Jesus comes.”⁴²

A Hermeneutical Principle

Demanding that all historical events be accepted as normative for all of church history mistreats, rather than honors, the historical literature of the New Testament. Richard Melick notes an important hermeneutical principle for determining which parts of a historical narrative are intended to be normative for all times, and which are mere “details that help paint the landscape.”⁴³

Like the other forms of writing, historical writing has its own problems of interpretation. The basic one is: What is purely descriptive and what is normative? Most abuses of historical literature occur at this point. Some people try to make what is a description of historical events a normative pattern. That is, they *confuse description with command*. . . .

A general rule of thumb in historical interpretation is that *if the Scripture does not teach that the events are universal they are not*. That means, for example, that the writer of Acts does not expect Pentecost to be repeated any more than he expects the shipwreck at Malta to be repeated. He handled them both the same way. Even though one is the direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the other is not, neither event is reported as normative for the church [emphasis added].⁴⁴

⁴¹Dennis and Rita Bennett, *The Holy Spirit and You* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1971), 18-19; Donald Gee, *Concerning Spiritual Gifts*, rev. ed. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1980), 19-24; and C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1988), 19-24.

⁴²John MacArthur, Jr., *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 73.

⁴³Richard R. Melick, “The Hermeneutics of History: Interpreting the Book of Acts,” *Mid-America Theological Journal* 14 (Spring 1990): 102.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 100-05.

Acts is a historical, transitional book. It contains many unique incidents that are not normative for Christians or churches today. Pettegrew observed, “Many doctrines and practices taught in the Epistles are, of course, illustrated in the Acts for the example of modern-day Christians. But . . . we must not make the tragic spiritual and doctrinal mistake of teaching the experience of the apostles instead of experiencing the teaching of the apostles.”⁴⁵ Robert Gromacki added:

Certain things happened in the early church which were only temporary in nature. They were never intended to become permanent patterns. Christians today do not worship God in a Jewish temple ([Acts] 2:46; 3:1). Christians need not sell everything they own in order to support the poor (4:32-37). Christians today are not struck dead instantaneously for lying (5:1-11). Prison doors are not opened supernaturally (5:19). Christians are not converted today through a direct revelation and appearance of Christ (9:1-19).⁴⁶

Transitions in Acts

The use of spiritual gifts described in Acts and 1 Corinthians was during the transitional period of the New Testament era. Mal Couch observed seven transitions in the book of Acts.

The first was a *historical* transition. Acts moved early church history from the Gospels to the Epistles.⁴⁷ “The Gospels record the theological history of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, focusing primarily on His three-year public ministry, culminating with His death and resurrection. The Epistles develop the theological implications of Christ’s life and death.”⁴⁸ Acts

⁴⁵Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 117-118.

⁴⁶Robert Glenn Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 95.

⁴⁷Mal Couch, ed., *A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 18.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 18-19.

was also the bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles, giving the historical background for ten of Paul's thirteen books.⁴⁹

The second transition was *religious*. Acts moved the gathering of believers from the synagogue and temple, prominent in the gospels, to a new entity—the church. The synagogue, temple, and church co-existed in Acts; but the former increasingly became a gathering place for unbelieving Jews, while the church became a gathering of believing Jews and Gentiles. The apostle Paul attended synagogue services whenever and wherever possible, but he did so primarily for the opportunity it afforded to proclaim the good news of the Messiah's substitutionary death, burial, and resurrection to the local Jewish population.⁵⁰ He used it as an opportunity to proclaim the passage of the old covenant and the dawning of the new.

Third, in Acts, *God's program transitioned from Israel to the Church*. The believing remnant of Israel was both a part of Israel and a part of the church. God's salvation program was being worked out through the church, the body of Jewish and Gentile believers.⁵¹

The fourth observable transition in the book of Acts was *theological*. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ was physically present. In Acts, Jesus Christ ascended (Acts 1), the Holy Spirit descended (Acts 2), and God is now present with His church in the person and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, from whence He will come again at a time appointed by the Father. He now waits until His enemies will be made His footstool (Ps. 110:1).⁵²

⁴⁹Ibid., 19. "Romans (Acts 19:21-22); 1 and 2 Corinthians (Acts 18:1-16); Galatians (Acts 13:14-14:28); Ephesians and Colossians (Acts 19:1-20:35); Philippians (Acts 16:11-40); 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Acts 17:1-9); and Philemon (Acts 18:22-23)."

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

The fifth transition was *pneumatological*. Since Pentecost the Spirit is not only *with* believers but also *in* believers.⁵³

Sixth, Acts records a *national* transition, from Jews to Gentiles.⁵⁴ At its birth, the church was populated by “Jews, proselytes (i.e., gentile converts to Judaism), and God-fearers (i.e., Gentiles who were sympathetic to Jews and Jewish monotheism, but who had not formally converted).”⁵⁵ So it continued through Acts 9. A pivotal even occurred in Acts 10. The Holy Spirit directed Peter to preach in the house of Cornelius. For the first time, uncircumcised Gentiles who were not Jewish proselytes entered the church. By the end of Acts, the church was well on its way to being predominately Gentile.⁵⁶

Finally, the seventh transition was *dispensational*. Acts records the church’s struggle and joy of learning to function under grace rather than under law.⁵⁷ This seems appropriate; it is not anti-Semitic. The majority of the population of the world is gentile.

The Purpose of the Transitional Period

Two key points can be observed about the purpose of the transitional period. It was both enlightening and evangelistic.

Enlightening

First, during the transitional period of the New Testament era the Old Testament saints were enlightened about the Messiah. God moved His people, Jews, proselytes, and God-fearers, from the old covenant into the new covenant era. John MacArthur summarizes, “In Acts we go

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 20.

⁵⁵D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), July 30.

⁵⁶Couch, *A Bible Handbook*, 20.

⁵⁷Ibid., 20.

from the synagogue to the church, from law to grace, from Old Testament saints to New Testament saints, from a body of Jewish believers to the body of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles, who are all one in Christ.”⁵⁸ Couch noted that a transition period was necessary “to reach the Old Testament saints with the gospel.”⁵⁹ He wrote:

“Old Testament saints” means those who were saved under the previous dispensation. It must be remembered that all those who were saved and still living before the cross did not suddenly lose their salvation after the cross until they accepted the death of Christ for their salvation.

As of Acts 2, the new content of faith for salvation were the three points of the gospel as explained by the apostle Paul: (1) Christ died for our sins; (2) He was buried, the evidence of His death; and, (3) He rose again on the third day (1 Cor. 15:1-4). This is the content of the gospel, and this is what one must believe and trust to have salvation. However, that was not the content of faith prior to Acts 2. In the Gospels, we read of the apostles traveling throughout the land of Israel preaching the “gospel,” but the gospel in the Gospels is not the same content as found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. The Gospels stress that Jesus is the Messianic King, in whom one must trust to receive salvation. It should be noted that Jesus did not clearly proclaim His coming death to the apostles until Matthew 16:21. Yet even before that we find the apostles proclaiming the gospel. Obviously, the gospel they preached did not include the substitutionary death of Christ. When He finally told them about His death, not only did it take them by surprise but also they did not fully understand what He was saying.

How long did the transition last? One answer is that it lasted until all those died who were born and had come to faith under the law. But the transition may have been fading from Acts 23 on.⁶⁰

Someone may ask, “Why did it take an entire generation for the transitions to be completed?”⁶¹ Pettegrew suggests six reasons.

First, there was a powerful resistance to change ingrained into the Jews of that time. The Jews . . . had great national pride in their religion. To modify the traditions of their faith would be like repudiating their nation and history.

Second, the leaders of the early church were reluctant to change. Peter, for example, had to have a divine push before he was willing to go to a Gentile’s house (Acts 10). Later, he was more timid than he should have been in his contacts with Gentiles, and the apostle Paul was forced to rebuke him (Gal. 2).

⁵⁸MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 85.

⁵⁹Couch, *A Bible Handbook*, 20.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 20.

⁶¹Pettegrew, 116.

Third, many Old Testament saints were alive at the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. It was necessary to take the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to these people to bring them into the benefits of the new order. . . .

Fourth, because the means of communication were so much slower than today, it took time for the pertinent information to spread across the known world, especially for the Jews (e.g., Act 19). . . .

Fifth, the believers did not have the New Testament letters and treatises to explain the events. . . .

Sixth, the nation of Israel had decided that Jesus was an impostor. Consequently, the Israelites had to be shown that they were wrong. This result was accomplished through the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, His ascension into heaven, and His outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus, an epoch was needed when the apostles were working miracles, and the Holy Spirit was evidencing the truth of their message with supernatural signs.⁶²

The transitional period was a time when the Old Testament saints were enlightened. They were already true believers. What they believed was true, but it was incomplete. Apollos is a good example.

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man *and* mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26).

Apollos was an Old Testament saint. What he believed was true, just incomplete. Aquila and Priscilla simply filled in the missing pieces of his faith. Pettegrew observed:

The disciples, like the Old Testament saints and like Christians today, were saved by grace through faith. As Ryrie has well stated, “The basis of salvation is always the death of Christ; the means is always faith; the object is always God (though man’s understanding of God before and after the incarnation is obviously different); but the content of faith depends on the particular revelation God was pleased to give at a certain time.” Therefore the disciples did not have to be “resaved,” or to be saved in some other way after the death of Christ. They were already believers in Christ.⁶³

Evangelistic

⁶²Ibid., 116-117.

⁶³Ibid., 78.

Second, the transitional period of the New Testament era was evangelistic. Unbelieving Jews and Gentiles were converted in large numbers as God worked miraculously through the apostles, and their close associates, to confirm their proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The transitional period was a time when God revealed His new way of working. God taught the Jews that He was no longer working through the Levitical priesthood and the Old Testament law. He was now working through His new covenant of grace (Gal. 3-4).

In the transitional period of the New Testament era, God confirmed to the Jews that the Messiah, promised in the Old Testament, had come. Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who was born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), proclaimed God's truth (Deut. 18:15), worked miracles (Isa. 35:5-6), was crucified (Ps. 22, especially v. 16; Isa. 53:5; Zech. 12:10), buried (Isa. 53:9), and raised from the dead (Isa. 53:10) on the third day, was indeed the Messiah. Accepting the facts took some time for the Jewish people. Tragically, most were never willing to recognize and receive Jesus Christ as their Messiah.

The intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and even nationalistic struggle faced by Jewish people in New Testament times was unprecedented. The Old Testament laws, sacrificial system, ceremonies, and feasts were revealed and commanded by God. Were the Jews to suddenly turn their backs on the faith revealed to their fathers and practiced from their childhood? How could they be sure Jesus Christ was truly the Messiah and not an impostor? Did He fulfill all the Messianic prophecies? If so, why did many of the priests, Pharisees, and Sadducees reject Him? Could their religious leaders possibly be wrong?

Many first century Jews wondered, "Should I receive Jesus Christ, or should I look for another Messiah?" Even some who believed struggled with such questions during His earthly

ministry. “And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” (Matt. 11:2-3). The questions were difficult and serious.

Saul of Tarsus’s attitude toward Jesus Christ was likely representative of the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and nationalistic struggles of many first century Jews. D. A. Carson describes Saul’s perspective.

For him, the notion of a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms. Messiahs rule, they triumph, they win. The Law insists that those who hang on a tree are cursed by God. Surely, therefore, the insistence that Jesus is the Messiah is not only stupid, but verges on the blasphemous. It might lead to political insurrection: the fledgling church was growing, and might become a dangerous block. It had to be stopped; indeed, what was needed was a man of courage . . . like Phinehas who averted the wrath of God by his decisive action against the perverters of truth and probity (Num. 25 . . .), someone who really understood the implications of these wretched delusions and who saw where they would lead.⁶⁴

Saul recognized “the fundamental incompatibility between the old order and the new,”⁶⁵ and determined to be a man like Phinehas. When Stephen was stoned “he expressed his agreement with Stephen’s death sentence as publicly as possible by guarding the executioners clothes.”⁶⁶ “And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’” (Acts 7:48b-49). F. F. Bruce notes, “It has been suggested further that he [Saul] acted as *praeco* or herald, charged with proclaiming that the convicted person was about to be executed for the specified offense.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴Carson, July 22.

⁶⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, gen. ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 161.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 161.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

Righteous indignation and holy fervor motivated Saul to make “havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison” (Acts 8:3). Therefore, just prior to his conversion, he was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” and he “went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2).

Paul’s struggle before his conversion was likely representative of many of his countrymen. Therefore, a transitional period was needed to evangelize the Jews and enlighten the Old Testament saints.

God was gracious, patient, and thorough in confirming His New Testament revelations. He did so during the transitional period of the New Testament era.

THE GIFT OF APOSTLESHIP

The gift of apostleship is closely tied to the transitional nature of the New Testament era.⁶⁸ In fact, to overlook the transitional period is to overlook one of the key factors in understanding the gift and ministry of the apostles. Those who do not recognize this concept inevitably conclude apostles continue to operate in the church in some form.

The writer does not believe Scripture supports the continuation of apostleship. Rather, he believes the apostles were a particular group of men, unique to the first century A.D. The gift has not continued to function in the church in either a primary or a secondary sense. Seven conclusions, drawn from the New Testament evidence, convinced the writer of the uniqueness of the apostles.

⁶⁸MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 85.

Restricted, Guarded Group

First, the apostles were a restricted and carefully guarded group.⁶⁹ The synoptic writers noted Jesus Christ's personal call of the "twelve" (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 3:14-19; 6:7-13; Luke 6:13-16; 9:1-10). Luke stated that the "twelve" were chosen from among His disciples (Luke 6:13). Both Matthew and Luke noted that Christ identified the twelve as "apostles" (Matt. 10:2; Luke 6:13).

The twelve apostles were given "power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases" (Luke 9:1). The miracle-working power given to the apostles was closely associated with their commission to preach (Mark 6:12-13). Luke noted that when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, "the twelve apostles" were with Him (Luke 22:14).

The fourth gospel did not list the names of the apostles. John quoted Jesus' reference to them as "the twelve" (John 6:70-71). Apparently, by the time the book was written, late in the first century, the twelve apostles were so widely known, naming them was unnecessary.

After Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus and committed suicide, the remaining eleven apostles, along with other followers of the Lord, met together in Jerusalem. That meeting followed a forty-day period during which the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ gave "commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:2-3). To be sure no one misunderstood who the apostles were, the remaining eleven apostles were named in Acts 1:13.

During the Jerusalem gathering, 120 disciples (v. 15), including the eleven apostles, chose Judas Iscariot's replacement. Peter explained that a successor needed to be chosen for

⁶⁹Thomas R. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1983), 67.

“Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus,” (v. 16) because “he was numbered with us [the apostles] and obtained a part in this ministry” (v. 17).

Judas’ replacement was proposed. “And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias” (v. 23). They asked the Lord to reveal His will. They prayed, “O Lord, . . . show which of these two You have chosen” (v. 24). “And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (v. 26). It is significant that neither the church nor the apostles voted. Jesus Christ appointed all of the apostles. Clearly, the apostles were a restricted and carefully guarded group.

Were the disciples too hasty in choosing a successor for Judas? Did God intend for Paul to replace Judas Iscariot? Charles Ryrie believes the disciples were not too hasty; they did God’s will. His evidence is Acts 2:14, which describes “Peter, standing with the eleven” to preach on the Day of Pentecost. Peter and “the eleven” again make twelve apostles.⁷⁰ Acts 6:2 further supports including Matthias among the 12 apostles. “The twelve” called the disciples together to solve a church problem. The twelve had to include Matthias, for Paul was not converted until Acts 9.

Paul, though not Judas’ replacement, certainly was an apostle. His apostolic ministry was directed to the Gentiles, just as Peter and other apostles directed their ministries toward the Jews (Gal. 2:8-9).

Nine men (other than the original twelve), have been called apostles.⁷¹ It seems certain that Matthias (Acts 1:24-26), Paul, Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), and James (Gal. 1:19) were

⁷⁰Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1961), 16.

⁷¹Flynn, 40-41; Andrew Wilson, “Apostle Apollos?” *JETS*, 2013 June, vol. 56, no. 2: 325-335.

recognized as apostles. More doubtful are Silas and Timothy (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7), and Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6, 9).

Allowing the possibility of four or even nine apostles beyond the original twelve does not swing the door open for an unlimited number of modern-day apostles. The opposite is true. The apostles were a restricted and carefully guarded group. Even Paul went to great lengths to defend his apostleship (1 Cor. 9:1-6; Gal. 1:11-2:10). Second Corinthians 11:13 and Revelation 2:2 warned the churches to beware of “false apostles.”

The New Testament church did not give the title “Apostle.” Though the church recognized them and received them, Christ alone appointed apostles (Eph. 4:11). Therefore, the apostles were a restricted and carefully guarded group.

Resurrection Witnesses

Second, the apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. After Judas Iscariot was revealed as a fraud and committed suicide, the gathered disciples selected his replacement. Note the purpose. Peter said that Judas’ successor was to “become a witness with us [the eleven apostles] of His [Christ’s] resurrection” (Acts 1:22). The candidates had to meet two stated qualifications. They had to be (1) men who accompanied the apostles during the entire earthly ministry of Jesus and (2) they had to have seen the resurrected Lord. “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). In addition, apostles were personally selected and commissioned by Jesus Christ. Grudem observed:

First, though the term *apostle* is not common in the gospels, the twelve are called “apostles” specifically in a context where Jesus is commissioning them, “sending them out” to preach in his name . . . (Matt. 10:1-7).

Similarly, Jesus commissions his apostles in a special sense to be his “witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And in choosing another apostle to replace Judas, the eleven apostles did not take the responsibility on themselves, but prayed and asked the ascended Christ to make the appointment: “Lord, . . . *show which one of these two you have chosen . . .*” (Acts 1:24-26).

Paul himself insists that Christ personally appointed him as an apostle. He tells how, on the Damascus Road, Jesus told him that he was appointing him as an apostle to the Gentiles: “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and to bear witness . . . delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you” (Acts 26:16-17). He later affirms that he was specifically appointed by Christ as an apostle (see Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11).⁷²

Some who argue for a continuation of the gift of apostleship note that Paul did not meet Peter’s qualifications in Acts 1:21-22. He had not “accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, . . . to that day when He was taken up.” However, Paul stated that after the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to “all the apostles, then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:7-8). Grudem notes that “it seems certain that there were none [no apostles] appointed after Paul. When Paul lists the resurrection appearances of Christ, he emphasizes the unusual way in which Christ appeared to him, and connects that with the statement that this was the ‘last’ appearance of all.”⁷³ Certainly, it was the last appearance in which Jesus Christ issued an apostolic call.

Wilson acknowledges that “last” (*eschatos*) (1 Cor. 15:8) “refers to a chronological and principal ‘lastness’—that is, that Jesus appeared to Paul after his resurrection, and then after that appeared to nobody else.”⁷⁴ He notes Paul’s personal defense of his apostleship when he asked the Corinthians, “Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). He argues, in my opinion, unconvincingly, that Paul was not giving a *necessary*

⁷²Grudem, 907.

⁷³Ibid., 910.

⁷⁴Wilson, 333-34.

qualification for all apostles, but a *sufficient* defense of his own apostleship.⁷⁵ He uses this information in building his case that Apollos, who had not seen the resurrected Christ, was recognized by Paul as an apostle. His ultimate agenda is revealed in the last sentence of his journal article, “It may also suggest that, according to Paul, although the appearances of the risen Jesus ceased with Paul’s encounter on the Damascus road, the *apostoloi* did not.”⁷⁶ If one can confirm a biblical apostle who had not met the requirement of an eyewitness encounter with the resurrected Lord Jesus, then the door is opened, even if only a crack, for multiple modern-day apostles.

In spite of arguments to the contrary, the biblical evidence seems clear to this writer. Being an eyewitness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a primary requirement for an apostle, and witnessing to the fact was the primary responsibility of an apostle. Thomas Edgar declares:

There are other passages . . . stating that the apostles were witnesses of the resurrection. Acts 1:1-14 states this. The apostles whom Jesus chose (verse 2) were “the twelve” (verse 13). They were given indisputable proof of Jesus’ resurrection (verse 3) and were assigned to be witnesses of Jesus (verse 8). It is clear from the apostles’ sermons in Acts and other passages that the witness was primarily to His resurrection. In Acts 5:17-32 the apostles (verse 18) were questioned by the authorities. They answered that they were witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation (verses 29-32). Peter stated in Acts 10:39-42 that the resurrected Christ appeared “not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. And He charged us to preach unto the people and to testify.” Peter apparently referred to the charge of Acts 1:8. Acts 13:31 presents the same idea. Acts 24:15-21 indicates that the resurrection was a central theme to the Apostle Paul’s message (cf. Acts 26:6-8,16).⁷⁷

As the apostles gave bold and powerful witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, thousands of people were saved. A brief survey of Acts shows the fast and phenomenal growth of the number of believers and the number of churches in the first three decades of the New

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 335.

⁷⁷Edgar, 48-49.

Testament church.⁷⁸ Their numbers grew from 120 (1:15), to 3000 (2:41), to 5000 (4:4). The Lord added new believers to the church daily (2:47), added multitudes (5:14), then “multiplied” them “greatly” (6:7). The multiplying number of disciples of Jesus Christ soon spread into surrounding areas. As they went, not only were believers multiplied, the number of churches also multiplied (Acts 9:31; 16:5).

The amazing growth of the New Testament church did not go unchallenged. In the days following Pentecost, the apostles Peter and John went to the temple to pray. Outside the temple courtyard, at the Beautiful Gate, they encountered a man who had been lame from birth. The beggar asked for money; Peter had something far better to offer. He said, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” Peter took the man by the right hand, lifted him up, and God heal him (Acts 3:1-7).

The healed man leaped up and walked into the temple. His excitement would not allow him to remain silent and still. He began walking and leaping and praising God. The man and the undeniable miracle naturally attracted the attention of a crowd of curious people. Peter used the opportunity to tell them the man had been healed through the power of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, then called them to repentance and faith (Act 3:8-26).

“Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening” (4:1-3).

The Sadducees were among those “greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” Warren Wiersbe notes:

⁷⁸Ryrie, *Acts*, 8-9.

We would expect the Sadducees to oppose the message because they did not believe in the resurrection of the human body (Acts 23:6-8). Peter's fearless declaration that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead ran contrary to their religious beliefs. If the common people questioned the theology of their spiritual leaders, it could undermine the authority of the whole Jewish council. Instead of honestly examining the evidence, the leaders arrested the Apostles and kept them in custody over night, intending to try them the next day.⁷⁹

The apostles were detained for their witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even so, when Peter stood before the Sanhedrin to explain their actions, he used the opportunity to proclaim Christ's resurrection (Acts 4:8-12). Later that day, since no crime had been committed, Peter and John were released with a warning to never again speak in the name of Jesus. Immediately they went to their companions to report what had happened. Together they prayed for boldness to preach the word, and power to perform signs and wonders (Acts 4:13-31). God answered, for "with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33).

Miracle Workers

Third, the apostles were empowered to work miracles. When the apostles proclaimed the resurrection, God confirmed their words by working miracles through them.⁸⁰ Their miracle working power gave new believers confidence in the apostle's teaching. The 3,000 who believed and were baptized on the day of Pentecost, "continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles"(Acts 2:42-43).

The close relationship between the apostles' witness and miracles is shown when Peter testified before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4). He confirmed that the crippled man at the temple gate was healed "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, . . . whom God raised from the dead" (v.

⁷⁹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Acts*, in vol. 1 of *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 414.

10). The Jewish council could not deny the miracle because the healed man stood before them (v. 14). The council did not command the apostles to stop performing miracles. Rather, they ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. The miracle made the apostles' testimony undeniable (vv. 16-17), but miracles are insignificant apart from the testimony about the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

The continued growth of the church in Jerusalem was closely associated with the apostles' witness and miracles. "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people" (Acts 5:12). The result was that "believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (v. 14).

The apostle Paul's effectiveness in spreading the Gospel among the Gentiles was partially a result of the miracles God worked through him. His works made his words believable. "For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, by word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient—in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem, and round about to Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:18-19).

Paul, however, did not teach that Christians must work miracles to confirm their testimonies. On the contrary, God's miracles, performed through Paul, were a proof of his apostleship. "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds" (2 Cor. 12:12).

The writer of Hebrews speaks of the salvation which was first "spoken by the Lord" [Jesus Christ's personal revelation], and was "confirmed to us by those who heard him" [the apostles] (Heb. 2:3). We are not to neglect this salvation because God confirmed its validity by

⁸⁰MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 82.

signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit (v. 4). Wiersbe stated, “The phrase ‘signs and wonders’ is found eleven times in the New Testament. Here it refers to the miracles that witnessed to the Word and gave confirmation that it was true. These miracles were performed by the Apostles (see Mark 16:17-20; Acts 2:43).”⁸¹ MacArthur adds:

The power to perform miracles was given specifically and exclusively to the apostles and their closest associates. Jesus’ simple promise to the twelve is recorded in Matthew 10:1: “Having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.” As the spirit was given and the church age began, the apostles continued to manifest those two supernatural gifts. In fact, the apostles were so associated with such miracles that Paul reminded the believers at Corinth that “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12).

Miracle powers, then, were limited in scope and restricted to apostles only. They were not given to the average Christian (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:3-4), though some who were commissioned by an apostle shared in the ministry of miraculous gifts (such as Philip; Acts 8:6-7).⁸²

The miracles of the apostles confirmed the message they preached. The same is said of our Lord’s miracles, which were a part of His Messianic credentials. He said, “If you don’t believe what I say, look at what I do. My works confirm that what I say is true” (John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 5:36; 10:24-25; 37-38 and 20:30-31).

The miracle-working power of the apostles was unlimited at first: “they were all healed” (Acts 5:16). But as time went by, God used them to work fewer miracles. Paul himself was not healed of a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7), even though he prayed in faith that it might be removed (v. 8). Toward the end of his life, Paul advised Timothy, “Use a little wine for your

⁸¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Hebrews*, in vol. 2 of *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 282.

⁸²John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 200.

stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" (1 Tim. 5:23). He even left "Trophimus . . . in Miletus sick" (2 Tim. 4:20). Surely he would have healed these dear ones if he had been able.⁸³

MacArthur insists, "The miracles of the apostolic age were not to be the pattern for succeeding generations of Christians."⁸⁴ God empowered the apostles to work miracles to confirm their witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Authoritative Representatives

Fourth, the apostles were the authoritative representatives of Jesus Christ in the New Testament church. Apostle was transliterated from the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning a messenger, an ambassador, a representative, one sent out. It occurs more than eighty times in the Greek New Testament. The main idea was of one sent to men as a representative of Christ. An apostle being sent out had nothing to do with geographical travel.⁸⁵

"As representatives of Christ," states Edgar, "the apostles had great authority in the early church. This authority was evident not only by authoritative statements and actions but also by the need for the apostles to lay hands on specific groups of unique converts, such as those in Samaria."⁸⁶

Examples of the apostles' authoritative position in the New Testament church are obvious in Acts. Two examples seem sufficient. The first example is the phrase, "the apostles' feet." When believers gave money or goods to assist their needy brothers and sisters, the offerings were laid at "the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:35, 37).

Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold some land and gave part of the money to help the needy. They lied, saying they had given it all. Again, the money was laid "at the apostles' feet"

⁸³Ibid., 125-26.

⁸⁴Ibid., 126.

⁸⁵Edgar, 47.

(Acts 5:2). Obviously, laying something at the apostles’ feet was a way of declaring a thing was given to God,⁸⁷ for Peter rebuked Ananias for lying to the Holy Spirit (v. 3), which is lying to God (v. 4). Peter did not claim to be God, but simply to be God’s representative.

A second example of the authority of the apostles is in Acts 15. When a dispute arose on the mission field between Jewish believers and Gentile converts, the believers went back to Jerusalem to the apostles to settle the dispute (vv. 1-6). Clearly, the apostles were recognized as the authoritative representatives of Christ in the early church.

Wrote Scripture

Fifth, the apostles were entrusted with the New Testament revelation. They, and close associates under their authority, were inspired to write Scripture—the books of the New Testament. Believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42). Every book in the New Testament was accepted into the canon of Scripture based, in part, on its being written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle.⁸⁸ Grudem stated:

It is primarily the apostles who are given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall accurately the words and deeds of Jesus and to interpret them rightly for subsequent generations.

Jesus promised this power to his disciples (who were called apostles after the resurrection) in John 14:26: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” Similarly, Jesus promised further revelation of truth from the Holy Spirit, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14). In these verses the disciples are promised amazing gifts to enable them to write Scripture . . .

Furthermore, those who have the office of apostle in the early church are seen to claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets, an authority to speak and write words that are God’s very words. . . . This claim . . . is . . . frequent in the writings of the apostle Paul. . . . (1 Cor. 2:9 [and] . . . 13).⁸⁹

⁸⁶Ibid., 64.

⁸⁷John B. Polhill, *Acts* in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 153.

⁸⁸MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 24.

⁸⁹Grudem, 60.

Paul's vigorous defense of his apostleship was not a personal recognition campaign. He defended his apostleship so that his teaching would be accepted and his writings would be received for what they were: the Word of God.

In all his New Testament epistles, except Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon, Paul identified himself as an apostle. By so introducing himself, acceptance of His epistles as the Word of God was expected. The apostle Peter supported Paul's claim, equating Paul's epistles with "the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:15-16), and the commands of the apostles with the writings of the Old Testament prophets (3:2). Ephesians 3:5 and Hebrews 2:3-4 refer to the revelations given to the apostles. Notice also Jude 17: "Remember the words, which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostles were entrusted with the New Testament revelation and inspired to write Scripture.

Foundation of the Church

Sixth, the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church. Ephesians 2:20 declares that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." MacArthur states:

The foundation of the apostles and prophets refers to the divine revelation that they taught, which in its written form is the New Testament. Because the Greek genitive case appears to be used in the subjective sense, signifying the originating agency, the meaning is not that the **apostles and prophets** were themselves the **foundation**--though in a certain sense they were--but that they laid the foundation. Paul spoke of himself as a "wise master builder" who "laid a foundation" and went on to say, "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:10-11; cf. Rom. 15:20). These are New Testament **prophets**, as indicated by the facts that they are listed after **the apostles** and are part of the building of the church of Jesus Christ (cf. 3:5; 4:11). Their unique function was to authoritatively [sic] speak the word of God to the church in the years before the New Testament canon was complete. The fact that they are identified with the foundation reveals that they were limited to that formative period. As 4:11 shows, they completed their work and gave way to evangelists, and . . . pastors and teachers."⁹⁰ [Emphasis in original]

⁹⁰John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 82.

Not Missionaries, Church Planters, or Entrepreneurs

Finally, the apostles were not necessarily missionaries, church planters, or entrepreneurs. As stated above, several writers believe the gift of apostle continues in our day as a gift that empowers certain believers for cross-cultural mission work, church planting, and beginning new ministries. Their interpretation of the gift focused on the broad meaning of the word apostle as “one sent,” and the example of the missionary work of the apostle Paul.⁹¹

Certainly, Paul was a cross-cultural missionary and church planter, but this was not true of all apostles. When persecution “scattered” the believers out of Jerusalem, they “went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). The reference is to the evangelistic work of the scattered believers, not to the apostles’ work. On the contrary, Acts 8:1 says “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Edgar writes:

The initial outward thrust of Christianity was carried by Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:5-40) rather than by an apostle. Even Peter’s journey, described in Acts 9:32-43, was largely to previously reached areas, since believers were already in Lydda and Joppa. Although Philip initially reached the Samaritans, the Spirit was not received until the apostles came and laid hands on the Samaritan believers, thereby demonstrating that the authority of the apostles and Christ was connected with this new thrust.⁹²

CONCLUSION

The apostles were given to the first century church to establish it during the transitional period of the New Testament, and to lay the foundation of the church by recording the New Testament revelation. As Grudem said, “Though some may use the word *apostle* in English today to refer to very effective church planters or evangelists, it seems inappropriate and unhelpful to do so, for it simply confuses people who read the New Testament and see the high

⁹¹Flynn, 39.

authority that is attributed to the office of ‘apostle’ there.”⁹³ Seven observations about New Testament apostles lead me to conclude that so-called secondary apostles are not apostles.

First, the apostles were a restricted and carefully guarded group. Second, they were eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. Being eyewitnesses of the resurrection was a necessary qualification of the apostles, and proclaiming Christ’s resurrection was their primary ministry. Third, to demonstrate the validity of their spoken and written testimony about Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles were empowered to work miracles. Fourth, the apostles were the authoritative representatives of Jesus Christ in the New Testament church. As such, fifth, they were entrusted with the New Testament revelation. God used some of the apostles and their close associates to write the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, making them, sixth, along with the prophets, the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Today the church is being built upon that foundation, and Jesus Christ is “the chief cornerstone.” Seventh, the apostles were not necessarily missionaries, church planters, or ministry entrepreneurs.

The seven observations also lead me to conclude that the gift of apostleship is not given today. I conclude that the gift does not continue, not only because Ryrie said, “This is not a gift that God gives today,”⁹⁴ but because:

- The purpose of the gift of apostleship has been fulfilled. The Bible is the authoritative witness of Jesus Christ’s resurrection today. The gift is no longer needed.
- The qualifying requirements for an apostle are no longer available. Paul was the last person to see Jesus Christ and receive His Apostolic call.⁹⁵ Today, no one is able to perform the signs of an apostle.
- Apostleship has ceased because the transitional period of the book of Acts has concluded.

⁹²Edgar, 49-50.

⁹³Grudem, 911.

⁹⁴Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1982, 1986), 372.

⁹⁵The Apostle John saw a vision of the glorified Lord Jesus when he received the Revelation (Rev. 1:9-22). The vision was chronologically after Paul’s Damascus Road experience, but obviously it was not John’s first time to see Jesus nor was it the occasion his apostolic call.

- Apostles are no longer needed because the Canon is closed. No new revelations are being given.
- There are no more apostles because church polity is congregational, not hierarchical. Church government is local, autonomous, and congregational, with an emphasis on a regenerate church membership. Each member, indwelt and gifted by the Holy Spirit, is able to participate with the local church in discovering and doing God's will without the directives of an authoritative apostle. Churches, including new churches on mission fields, must submit to the authority of God's Word. They must not submit to the directives of a self-proclaimed apostle, no matter whether he claims to be a horizontal or vertical apostle. Such apostles are "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13). The church must beware, not submit.