

The Ministry of the Apostles – Then and Now
Acts 1:15-26

Sometimes innovation is not good – when it distorts the original perfect plan. If you take a perfectly pure glass of water, no matter how much muddy water you add to it, it will not get more pure; it will only get muddier. A related question that especially affects missions is, “How far can we go with contextualization of the message in reaching other cultures. Culture in and of itself is not bad, so we should not try to force our culture on others. Contextualization is necessary. But culture can be sinful, because there is no culture that is not tainted by the Fall, so we do need to confront culture at times. We must always be careful that contextualization doesn’t become compromise. In the history of missions contextualization has often become compromise; therefore we must be very careful. How can we know when we have crossed the line? How can we tell the difference? Here is a simple truth that will need to be unpacked: Follow the blueprint, but adjust it to the new context. You might be asking right now, “How does this pertain to our question about apostles?” When we understand the ministry of the apostle, we will realize that there are no apostles today who can add to what the original apostles brought to the table as our blueprint for living the Christian life. We certainly must adjust the apostles’ teaching to our new situations, but we dare not add to or subtract from their leadership. Contextualize without compromise. If there are apostles today, then we have people who are able to speak the very words of God and command absolute authority over the entire body of Christ – this was the ministry of the original apostles. All pretenders have ended up distorting the teaching of the apostles and therefore have proven to be false apostles, because God does not contradict Himself.

But I am assuming that all apostles speak the very words of God and have absolute authority over the entire church. Some today believe that there are two types of apostles, the original ones who spoke the very words of God and commanded absolute authority over the entire church and those who have a slightly less authority, but who are founders and leaders over ministries or groups of people, such as founders of new denominations (A.B. Simpson, John Wimber, etc.). When we examine the pertinent Scriptures we see that there are two uses for the word “apostle” (ἀπόστολος), but the second use is not what people who believe in modern day apostles think. The word for apostle derives from the idea of one being sent, but “apostle” became a technical term for those in absolute leadership of the early church. Out of the 80 times the word “apostle” or its derivative is used, there are only two senses that it is used. Either it is referring simply to a messenger that has been sent by someone else (Jn 13:16; 2 Cor 8:23; Php 2:25) and does not have any leadership connotations at all, or it refers to the supreme leaders of the church; the only ones mentioned are the twelve apostles, who are the apostles to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas, who are the apostles to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13), and possibly James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19)¹. Some would also include Andronicus and Junia, but these are not actually referred to as apostles (see CSB and ESV). There is no basis from Scripture for a third use of “apostle” as a leader or founder of a ministry. I want to examine Acts 1:15-26 to see what the ministry of apostle is and why there are no apostles today.

In Acts 1:15-20 we see that the apostles recognized by God that they needed to replace Judas. F.F. Bruce is correct in stating: “It was Judas’s apostasy, not his death, that created the vacancy which had to be filled; there is no suggestion of such a vacancy after the death of James the son of Zebedee (12:2), for his lot remains secure to him in the resurrection.”² There is no Biblical or historical basis for the idea that the office of apostle was to continue after the original apostles. The slot was needed to be

¹ This passage may not be referring to James as an apostle, but rather the idea would be that Paul did not see any of the apostles and only saw one of the chief leaders of the Jerusalem church, namely James.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 109.

filled because there needed to be twelve apostles as the foundation for the church. Revelation 21:12-14 describes how in the New Jerusalem the names of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles will be inscribed on the foundations. The twelve tribes represent the Old Covenant people of God and the twelve apostles represent the New Covenant people of God, combined to make the one people of God for all time. This idea of foundation is important. You don't keep building new foundations on top of old ones. You build the structure on the one foundation. The Church is likened to a temple in 1 Peter 2:5-8, built on the cornerstone which is Jesus. Jesus is also called the supreme apostle in Hebrews 3:1. But the church is also said to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone," in Ephesians 2:20. The passage goes on to say that the building or sanctuary is in the process of being built together, referring to the Church's growth, but it is clear that there is only need for one foundation and cornerstone.

Acts 1:21-22 reveals that there are no more apostles today, because of the qualifications of an apostle. They required someone who had been with them for the entire ministry, but the ultimate qualification was that the prospective candidate had to have been an eyewitness of the resurrection of Jesus. 2 Peter 3:2 says the commands of the Lord were to be given through the apostles. In 14:26; 15:26-27 and 16:12-13 reveal that the Holy Spirit would remind the apostles what Jesus said and would inspire them in such a way that they accurately recorded the teachings and actions of Jesus as well as the explanation necessary as a foundation of truth for the Church. John 14:26 says the Holy Spirit "will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you." This promise only refers to the apostles because the Spirit reminded them of what Jesus had already told them previously. The promise given in these three passages in John specifically states that the Spirit will guide them "into all the truth." A body of truth would be given to the apostles that would be sufficient – "all truth." Clearly this is referring to Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The apostles received "all truth" and passed it on in the form of the New Testament so that combined with the Old Testament we can be "complete, equipped for every good work." Each book in the New Testament was written by an apostle or by a prophet who was overseen by an apostle in the first century.

How do we know that there are no apostles today? The requirement to be an apostle is that they had to witness the resurrection of Jesus as an eyewitness. Even Paul fulfilled this requirement. In 1 Corinthians 9:1 Paul says, "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?" He states that the fact that he saw the Lord and that the Corinthians were his work in the Lord, being a "seal of my apostleship in the Lord," is proof of his apostleship. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 Paul lists all those Jesus appeared to after the resurrection and describes his own experience stating, "Last of all, as to one abnormally born, He also appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." He sees that a qualification for apostle was to see the risen Lord, and he notes that he was the last of all to see the risen Lord. He describes his experience "as to one abnormally born." The Greek word is *extroma* (ἐκτρομα), which refers to an untimely or abnormal birth. The ESV and the NAU translate it "as to one untimely born." The NKJV translates this phrase, "As by one born out of due time." The point Paul is making is that it seemed like he was past due because he didn't see the Lord until after the resurrection, but he was definitely the last one to see the risen Lord and therefore the last one who could fulfill the requirement for being an apostle (see also Acts 22:14). Other requirements for an apostle included signs and wonders (2 Corinthians 12:12), managers of God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 4:1), and one who commands absolute obedience (1 Corinthians 14:37-38; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 2 Peter 3:2; 1 John 4:6). The only people who fit these requirements are the twelve and Paul and probably Barnabas and perhaps James the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19). Their eyewitness testimony was absolutely critical and so the

entire New Testament represents those who were eyewitnesses or those under the direction of the apostles who gathered eyewitness testimony (i.e. Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3; Hebrews 2:3-4).

Some have claimed that because Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 list apostles as leaders ministering to the whole body of Christ, this means we still need apostles today. This idea misunderstands the ministry of an apostle. The New Testament apostle acted similarly to the Old Testament prophet in that they spoke and wrote the very words of God and demanded obedience from the entire people of God (2 Peter 3:2). No one today has this ministry. The canon of Scripture is closed and nobody has the command of the entire Church. Some claim this authority today, but they are mistaken. The ministry of apostle, since it is the foundation of the Church, is found in the product of the apostles, which is the New Testament. The Scriptures are our supreme authority. Only the Scriptures command our complete obedience. There are three possible sources for ultimate authority: self, tradition or revelation from God. Self, whether we go by our ability to reason or go by our feelings, cannot be the final authority, because we are finite and sinful and therefore prone to mistakes. Tradition, whether it is religious tradition or cultural tradition, is simply a group of selfs and therefore a group of finite and sinful people prone to mistakes. When we look at the Church, we see that tradition has been a mixed bag. Sometimes it is helpful (first four general councils of the Church), but it also has been harmful. The Popes who claim supreme authority have contradicted each other, giving evidence that they are not apostles. At one time there were actually three Popes excommunicating each other. The only viable supreme authority is God who has chosen to write the Bible through His apostles and prophets, recording and explaining accurately what Jesus came to do. Jesus was the final and ultimate revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-3) and the apostles and prophets recorded that revelation. We do not need any further books or apostles. We have the ministry of the apostles in the New Testament, describing the eyewitness accounts and explanations of Jesus' ministry while being fully inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

One last thing should be discussed before we conclude. Some have suggested that there were other apostles and speculate on Andronicus and Junia, even suggesting Junia was a female apostle. They also talk about a fivefold ministry being revived from Ephesians 4:11. This is pure speculation and distorts the obvious intention of the passages we have discussed, namely that it was necessary to see the living Lord and that Paul was the last to see the living Lord until He returns. Even those who endorse women elders and pastors admit that the passages in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 at the very least reveal the customs of that time. But if the custom of that time being advocated for at least that time in these passages is opposed to women in leadership, then it is an extreme stretch to say Junia is a woman apostle. Junia is probably a woman, but certainly not an apostle. The point of exegesis is not to try to find loopholes that though extremely unlikely, could be barely possible in order to advocate what we already want to believe. We should seek to interpret Scripture in the most likely way it was meant to be interpreted using the historical grammatical method of hermeneutics. In view of all the passages that discuss apostles, it seems the most likely explanation reveals that Paul was the last of the apostles and that we should not expect apostles today. The ministry of apostle continues as we devote ourselves to the apostles' teachings (Acts 2:42) as found in the New Testament.

Who are you going to follow? God's clear chosen leaders who spoke the very words of God without error, who saw the risen Lord, or those who mix truth with error? Even if I teach you something that goes contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible, go by the Bible, not me. I will be wrong at times, but God is never wrong.