

Lesson Supplemental – What is an Apostle?

In Acts 14:4, Luke explicitly labels both Paul and Barnabas as “apostles,” and he does so again in 14:14. Barnabas himself was never formally declared as an “apostle,” but the early church seems to view him in this regard. This leads to the question over what qualifies a person as an “apostle?”

“Apostle” Defined

The word “apostle” comes from the Greek word ἀπόστολος, meaning a messenger, envoy, or delegate; one that is commissioned by another to represent the commissioning institution or individual in some way. In the New Testament, this term is typically understood to be attributed to the Twelve chosen by Jesus during his ministry on earth; followed by being His envoys to proclaim the gospel to the world (Acts 1:8). However, a deeper word study analysis on this word would reveal that this term have also been applied to Jesus as the One sent by God (Heb 3:1), to prophets sent to warn Israel (Luke 11:49), to individuals sent by churches (14:14), and to individuals with a special function as God’s envoy (Gal 1:19) or part of a governing board of elders (Acts 15:2). Moreover, those who were declared “apostles” have also been declared to be the foundations of the church (Eph 2:20). Paul also declared himself as an apostle, being one sent to proclaim the gospel of Christ (Rom 1:1), as well as one who could exercise his authority to protect the church from false teachings (2 Cor 4; 5:20-21); and to act as liaison to maintain relationships between ministries (2 Cor 8).

With respect to historical usage, the term “apostle” was first applied to the Twelve who followed Jesus as He ministered to the villages. Since Luke specifically relates these twelve with this term (Luke 6:13), it was believed that only these twelve disciples may lay claim to this title. However, as we progress through the book of Acts and other New Testament epistles, we can observe this title being assigned to others beyond the original Twelve; most notably, the apostles Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4), as well as to Silas and Timothy (1 Thes 2:6). Furthermore, as we explore extra biblical literature, such as the Didache, we find instances where the name “apostle” has been applied to a whole class of nameless missionaries who move about from place to place to share the gospel.

Consolidating these various usages and references, we can conclude that there are basically two categories of apostleship:

- Those chosen by Christ and have witnessed the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22-25). This category of apostles are specifically and supernaturally gifted, and no longer exist.
- Those from the early church who were sent as messengers or ambassadors of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 8:23). To this group, the name “apostle” is less of a title, and more of a function. The function of the apostle is to preach the gospel from place to place in a very similar fashion as missionaries in our world today.

In order to qualify for the second category as “apostles,” the individual must be sent by Christ or by His church, being empowered with authority to serve as the foundation for the planting of a church. Effectively, an apostle in this category in today’s terms would be similar to a hybrid of a missionary and a church planter.

Does Apostles still exist today?

This latter definition for apostleship raises the question over whether this latter category of apostles still exist today. According to various church leaders, the answer would be in the affirmative; noting that much of the function is being performed, though the name is not being adopted. Accepting this interpretation for a modern day apostle, the characteristics that would define an apostle in our modern day culture, with reference to biblical and historical standards, would include:

- Being Sent by a church
- Share a convicting message of the gospel to unknown regions.
- Reputable; qualified to serve as an elder
- Able to plant churches and teach church order.
- Able to build and maintain relationships among ministries.