

Apostles—Slaves of Christ

Why do some apostles make themselves into super stars? And conversely, why do some folks claim there are no apostles today? Paul identifies it as one of the five gifts needed for the building up and maturing of the church. Why would some exalt this gift? And why would some believe that God has taken this gift away? The answer is centered in a misunderstanding of what an apostle was in the first place (in the Greco-Roman social context), and is based on a hierarchical understanding that places apostles at the top of the church structure when the New Testament clearly places them at the bottom. The understanding of leadership in the New Testament that should frame our understanding of apostles is the foot-washing, low-status slave (John 13), and the "race to the bottom" to become a "slave of all" (Matthew 20:20ff; 1 Corinthians 9:19).

An "apostle" in the ancient world is simply someone who is sent (Greek: apostolos). An apostle was someone who was sent to conduct business on the behalf of another. There was—originally speaking—nothing religious about them. They were normally an unvalued slave, who was expendable.

Travel in the ancient world was dangerous, and something that individuals did not choose lightly. Who would have the right to send someone on their behalf? A slave owner or a governmental or military commander. The person sent—the apostle—did not have a choice. In the case of the government or military, the apostle sent with orders normally would be a part of an armed entourage. The slave-apostle would not have such protection. The master would pick the slave he could most afford to lose, and send that one to conduct his business in some extended location. The apostle-slave might be the same as the lowest household slave who was given the shameful duty of washing feet (see John 13). Mattering least, and therefore sent.

Paul identifies himself as one such sent-slave in many ways in his letters: "Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1). Paul's most common self-description throughout his letters is: "I am a slave who is sent by Jesus to non-Jews to communicate the good news that the Kingdom of God has come in Jesus." English readers of the Bible find it easy to overlook this important aspect of Paul's self-understanding, since the 190 different Greek terms used for slavery in the New Testament are sanitized to "servant." This is not a very appropriate translation, since in Paul's day 1/3rd of the population of the Roman empire were masters who owned slaves, 1/3rd of the people were slaves, and 1/3rd were former slaves. Paul makes it clear what he means: slavery to Christ is about exclusive ownership—Christ is master/lord (kurios is the simple word for master-owner of a slave). "Am I now trying to win the approval of people or of God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's slave" (Galatians 1:10).

Another problem in understanding how the word "apostle" is used in the Bible is the medieval pictures we have in our minds of the twelve disciples of Jesus with halos around their heads. They were high status people with a lot of power, and there were only a few of them. This is a complete revisionistic interpretation of what an original apostle was. "Apostle" was not a title for a high status leadership position. Before and after Jesus "apostles" were low status slaves with no power of their own, and they were as common as dishwashers are today. If we practiced slavery like they did in the ancient world, when you said "apostle" today no one would think of the manager, owner or executive of a restaurant. They would think of the dishwashers and busboys. "Apostle" was not a claim to high status or authority, but a claim to low status and expendability. When you attached the words "of Christ" this communicated whose business and authority the apostle was operating under. Christ is the boss, he sent the apostle and, when the apostle speaks, he is merely the conduit.

"Apostolic" is not a scriptural term. If I were speaking scripturally, I would have explained why slave-apostles (like helps, giving, mercy, etc.) were common gifts then, and should be now. There were many apostles in the New Testament who were not the Twelve or Paul, who didn't author scripture, and would not have considered the gifting a title, status or privilege. What we need more than anything is a release of these kind of slave-apostles for the mission of Jesus to the lost and hurting. God is a sending God and commands his followers to go to those who have lost their way, not waiting for them to come to us.

Many leaders have heard the buzz and read the books and would like to be "apostolic in their leadership" and yet remain in-charge, in safety and security, in the cushy-comfort of some Christian bunker. Can't be done. To be an apostle is to become expendable, low status, and exposed to ridicule and insecurity in this life: "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the

end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ..." (1 Corinthians 4:9,10).

Apostles are given by God as a gift to the church and the world (Ephesians 4:11), and are needed most desperately. A church without apostles (and prophets, for that matter) is a fire without the flame. What's wrong with this Body? We have severed an essential limb of apostles through intellectualism, religious control and the flesh (and therefore most gifts lie dormant and unoffered to God—the role of apostles is a mainstay in equipping the Body for service and maturity; Ephesians 4:11ff). Most apostles are not found in the church-as-we-know-it, and that is why the flame is burning hot elsewhere. Jesus is the boss—as He was sent, so He is sending these He owns to suffer and serve in order to make known the presence and coming fullness of His Kingdom. Apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church-as-God-wants-it (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5-6; 4:11).

We need them to be released. They are little "a" and little "p" apostles and prophets, nobodies who have become somebody to God through Christ. We are not talking about a new version of the "one man show" that plagues the church-as-we-know-it. They are little "a" and little "p" apostles and prophets, but capital "S" on the end: "And God gave some to be apostleS, some to be prophetS..." We don't need more individualistic superstars. We need examples of what it means to "submit yourself to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

Please Lord, send workers into your abundant harvest!

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