
“That some should be Apostles”

by J. E. Young

Mr. Young informs us that the article which follows was born out of a nagging irritation caused by those who repeatedly blame the apostle Peter for making a wrong decision in the matter of Matthias. Whatever the immediate occasion, we are glad he was stimulated to make this contribution to the subject of apostleship in the New Testament. Mr. Young, who holds a degree in physics from the University of Washington, Seattle (“a better preparation than some might suspect for a Bible student”, he says), spent some years working with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and with Ediciones Certeza in Buenos Aires.

Is there any direct relationship between the Biblical concept of “apostle” and the task of the church today? Would we have the right, for example, to use the term to describe the modern-day missionary?

Although one would expect this to be a settled issue, in practice we find many discrepancies among writers who touch on the matter. Some would limit all consideration of apostleship to the Twelve (or the “eleven” plus Paul) only, other would admit an “extension” of the apostleship to include cases such as Banabas and James the brother of the Lord, while still others would say that the apostle was simply a missionary.¹

Scripture speaks clearly of those whom God the Holy Spirit has given to function in different capacities in the task of building up the church.² I would expect one category to take in account the missionary nature of the task, one category that would correspond to the the pioneer, the church planter. All would agree that initially that role belonged to the apostles, but a problem arises when we speak of the *continuation* of the missionary task. We find provisions made for church government, and logically would also expect something similar for the expansion of the church. The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility that New Testament usage would allow us to use the term “apostle” to describe the present day pioneer church planter.

¹ Rudolf Bultmann would go to the last extreme when he says: “The restriction of the concept ‘apostle’ to the ‘twelve’ . . . can scarcely have taken place in the earliest church . . . Paul calls all missionaries ‘apostles’ ” (*Theology of the New Testament* [New York, 1951], Vol. 1, p. 60).

² The two main lists are in 1 Cor. 12: 28 and Eph. 4: 11.

I. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE TWELVE

That the Twelve do not correspond to the present day missionary I would fully agree. They as a group had a unique relationship with the Lord and with the church.

First, they were specifically called out from the crowd of disciples.³ Throughout the Gospel record we see that the Twelve were obviously singled out to be his inner circle of disciples and to receive special teaching and tasks.⁴ Since they are called both the twelve apostles and the twelve disciples,⁵ it is very likely that many of the references that we see throughout the Gospels to “his disciples” are to the Twelve.⁶

Second, the qualifications laid down by Peter in Acts 1: 21, 22, would limit the group to men who had been with Jesus from the baptism of John until the ascension.

Third, that it was felt necessary to replace Judas indicates the uniqueness of the Twelve. Peter, in his explanation and prayer in Acts 1: 15-25, uses terms that indicate a specific position that must be filled. The quotation from Psalm 109 implies a definite office (ἐπισκοπή) and while praying he emphasizes “this ministry and apostleship” (v. 25, RSV).

Fourth, there are indications that Christ chose the number twelve on purpose. Most commentators would consider the “thrones” of Matt. 19: 28 and Luke 22: 30, and the twelve foundations of the city with the names of the apostles in Rev. 21: 14, to be symbolic. Nevertheless, the number seems to represent a reality not apparent in the present stage of the history of the Kingdom. F. F. Bruce, for example, suggests that:

It would not be fitting to leave the apostolic total short by one, when that total was intentionally fixed by Jesus to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel.⁷

And Schmidt states:

[Jesus] gives to his disciples, the twelve as representatives of the twelve tribes of the people of God, the holy people, judicial and administrative office in the reign of God.⁸

So Mark 3: 13-19 and John 7: 70. J. N. Geldenhuys states: “By a deliberate action, according to the Gospels, our Lord created out of the wider circle of disciples a group of men who henceforth formed a definite unit and to whom alone He gave the name ‘apostles’” (*Supreme Authority* [London, 1953], p. 46).

For example: Mark 4: 10; 6: 7; 9: 35; 10: 32; 11: 11; 14: 17.

Compare Matt. 11: 1 with 10: 2.

It is seldom obvious whether Jesus is with the Twelve or the larger group of disciples (as in Luke 6: 17). But, for example, in Mark 4: 34-36 and 6: 45 the group of disciples is small enough to fit into a boat. Ernest De Witt Burton mentions that “οἱ μαθηταί, frequent in all the Gospels, probably often refers to the Twelve, but is not in itself restricted to them” (*Galatians*, ICC, p. 366).

F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NIC) p. 49.

K. L. Schmidt, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 586.

Lightfoot also cites examples from the early Christian literature that give special symbolic significance to the number of the apostles, although the examples he gives are not too convincing.⁹

Fifth, the nature of their calling seems to indicate a unique authority. We see this especially in the instructions of the post-resurrection appearances, and in the resulting actions of the apostles themselves in the book of Acts. In Acts 1: 2, for example, we see that the risen Lord gave special teaching to the eleven during a period of forty days, which would possibly include such examples as we have in the latter chapters of Matthew, Luke and John. Though much of the upper-room discourse in John would seem to apply to the church in general, there are many sayings, including some which imply a special authority, which are definitely spoken for the eleven.¹⁰

It is on the basis of their unique authority that Geldenhuys would limit the *true* apostleship to the original eleven plus Paul.¹¹ And it is generally the fact of the apostolic authority that makes commentators hesitate when they deal with the cases of Barnabas and others.

II. THE "OTHER" APOSTLES

Nevertheless, the evidence we have presents a strong case for the existence of apostles other than the Twelve. Many commentators, in their efforts to emphasize the uniqueness of the Twelve, minimize as much as possible the existence and possible mission of the "other" apostles. But, as we shall see, the "casual" use of the term apostle seems to indicate the presence in the early church of a larger group of men who at least performed a task *similar* to that of the Twelve.

There are at least six passages that could be taken as references, or probable references, to the other apostles:

Acts 14: 4. Here Luke freely speaks of the "apostles" Barnabas and Paul. Also in Paul's defence of his apostleship in 1 Cor. 9, he seems to include Barnabas as another who deserved the rights of an apostle (v. 6).

Romans 16: 7. F. F. Bruce and others see this verse as saying that Andronicus and Junias were outstanding apostles.¹² Even

⁹ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (London, 1865), p. 100.

¹⁰ Geldenhuys seems to assume that the upper room discourse is for the eleven in his application of these verses (*Supreme Authority*, p. 60).

¹¹ So he says: "taking everything into consideration, all available evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that, in the highest sense of the word, only the original apostles and Paul were called and appointed to be the (apostles) of the exalted Lord" (*Supreme Authority*, p. 71).

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (TNTC), p. 271, and C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1957), p. 283.

those who reject that possibility, do so on other than grammatical grounds.¹³

2. *Corinthians 8: 23*. Although the tendency is to consider that ἀπόστολος is used here in the broader sense of messenger, the existence of a larger group of apostles would permit a translation such as that of Weymouth: “And as for our brethren, they are apostles of the churches”,¹⁴ without straining the text.

Galatians 1: 19. As Ridderbos comments concerning James the Lord’s brother, “on the basis of general considerations, one could accept the view that Paul was here counting him among the apostles”.¹⁵ Though this possibility is accepted by others, Cole¹⁶ would reject it primarily on the grounds that James did not meet the requirements of Acts 1: 21, 22; an objection, as we will see later, that does not necessarily apply in the case of the “other” apostles.

Philippians 2: 25. Even though there is even a stronger case here for considering that ἀπόστολος is used in the sense of messenger when referring to Epaphroditus, it is interesting to note that Paul calls him both *fellow worker and fellow soldier* (RSV), terms which would indicate that he was much more than a mere messenger. The conditions surrounding the sending of Epaphroditus would not necessarily have been very different from those in the case of Barnabas and Paul in Acts 13.

1 Thessalonians 2: 6. Paul here speaks of “we apostles” when he reminds them of his visit, but from Acts 17 we see that the only “recognized” apostle present was Paul himself. Here he would probably be referring at least to Silas, if not Timothy.

These “casual” references could easily be indications of that other apostleship, different from that of the Twelve, but one that had a parallel task to perform in the expansion of the church.

One other piece of evidence that should be considered is the reference to “false apostles”. Both Burton and Lightfoot¹⁷ agree that the existence of false apostles would imply a larger body of apostles, since the original Twelve would be known by the churches.

The term ψευδαπόστολος is used only in 2 Cor. 11: 13, though the phrase in Rev. 2: 2, “you . . . have tested those who call themselves

¹³ So Charles Hodge, *Romans* (London, 1835), p. 449.

¹⁴ R. F. Weymouth, *New Testament in Modern Speech* (London, 1929).

¹⁵ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (NIC), p. 68.

¹⁶ R. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (TNTC), p. 56.

¹⁷ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 374. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

apostles but are not, and found them to be false" (RSV), communicates the same idea. G. B. Caird, when he comments on the false apostles of Rev. 2: 2, states:

They must have been claiming to belong to that group of *apostles* of Christ which was wider than the Twelve, and which included James the Just, Barnabas, Paul, Silas, Andronicus and Junias When men came to Corinth who claimed to be *apostles* and produced impressive credentials, Paul dismissed them scathingly as "super-apostles", insisting that the only valid criterion of apostleship was whether "the works of an apostle" had been performed (2 Corinthians xii. 11 ff.).¹⁸

Since there appear to have been rapid changes in the practice of the early church, changes that began to be already seen during the first century, one would not expect writings other than the New Testament to help in determining the original sense of the apostleship. The early Fathers appeared to use the term both in reference to the Twelve and Paul, and in a wider sense, but as Lightfoot commented, the references are too general to build any inference upon.¹⁹

T. W. Manson seems to summarize the situation well when he writes:

There are here two objects in view: the creation of a circle of intimate companions, and the establishment of a missionary body. . . . These two objects of the appointment of the Twelve allow the word "apostle" to bear two senses in the early church. On the one hand it can refer to the college of the Twelve: on the other it may have the significance of "missionary". The history of the use of the term in the Church is the history of the suppression of the latter meaning by the former.²⁰

Although the total of the evidence is not large, it would not be difficult to infer from it that there was an apostolic *function* (I hesitate to use the word "office") that was recognized, or possibly taken for granted, by the early church. But before attempting to investigate just what that function was, we should consider the case of Paul.

III. THE CASE OF PAUL

Despite some insistence to the contrary, I would consider Paul to be one of the "other" apostles. Blaiklock, for example, takes a quite common position in his commentary on the choosing of Matthias in Acts 1:

It is commonly assumed that Peter ran ahead of God's purpose in seeking this appointment. Paul was destined for the vacant place.²¹

But this would presuppose both that the apostles acted wrongly in Acts 1, and that Paul's apostleship was equal to that of the

¹⁸ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London, 1966), p. 30.

¹⁹ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

²⁰ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 241.

²¹ E. M. Blaiklock, *Acts* (TNTC), p. 53.

Twelve, when neither presupposition is necessary. Actually, to accept Peter's inspiration in Acts 1: 21, 22, when he named the requirements for the new apostle, but then to disclaim it for verse 26 when he joined in the process of choosing Matthias, is a contradiction.

Despite the fact that Paul had a personal encounter with Christ, there are good reasons for identifying him with the other apostles, and not with the Twelve.

One of the more obvious reasons is that he did not meet the requirements of Acts 1: 21, 22 (assuming, of course, that Peter had the right to lay down just *those* requirements). He had seen the Lord, yes, but he had not accompanied the eleven: “during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (Acts 1: 21 RSV). In fact, on the basis of these verses, F. F. Bruce states:

Paul did not possess the qualifications set out in vv. 21 f. Besides, his apostleship was unique in character, as he himself maintains; he would certainly have dismissed as preposterous the idea that he was rightfully the twelfth apostle on the same footing as the eleven.²²

Many would emphasize that Paul's personal encounter with the risen Christ would place him with the Twelve, yet the uniqueness of that encounter lies not so much in its having happened, as in its timing (“last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me”, I Cor. 15: 8). For example, in I Cor. 15: 7 Paul mentions that Christ also appeared to James (the brother of the Lord²³). If we had a written account of that meeting, it would very likely help us to consider Paul's case in a clearer light. Part of the uniqueness of Paul is that we know so much more about him than about the other apostles. And in the case of James, there seems to be little reason why he could not also have written: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”²⁴

In Acts 13: 1-4 we see Paul listed among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch. The Holy Spirit instructed the church to set Paul and Barnabas apart for the work he had called them to, and in v. 4 we see them sent off by the Holy Spirit. It is then in Acts 14: 14 that we see Paul (together with Barnabas) called apostle for the first time. Despite his direct commission from the Lord in Acts 9, his *function* as an apostle seems to begin in the context of the church at Antioch, and as the result of the specific direction of the Holy Spirit.

²² F. F. Bruce, *Acts* (NIC), p. 52.

²³ It appears to be generally accepted that this reference is to James, the brother of the Lord, and not the James included in the Twelve. So F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIC), p. 351.

²⁴ I Cor. 9: 1.

IV. THE APOSTOLIC FUNCTION

If then we can conclude that there were other apostles, there remains the task of considering their function. Again I avoid the word "office", since it introduces questions that are foreign to the purpose of this paper. The issue at hand is not apostolic authority, not apostolic succession, but the apostolic role in the expansion of the church world-wide.

Eph. 2: 20 states that apostles are part of the foundation material that the church is built upon. This is generally interpreted as being a reference to the Twelve, or at the most, the apostles of the first generation of Christians,²⁵ but such a limitation is not necessary. The foundations that the Twelve laid had to be laid in men's lives, in groups of men and women who learned to live together as members of the body of Christ. Just as Jesus Christ laid down a foundation in the lives of his apostles, so did they in the early church, and so it must be done in every place where a congregation of Christians comes into existence.

C. K. Barrett criticizes the Twelve for being an insignificant group, except for two or three exceptions, that soon "dropped out of sight", without having either headed up a movement to convert the Jews, nor having taken on the mission of reaching the gentiles.²⁶ But he is drawing too many conclusions from silence. There are clear indications that the Twelve were fully occupied with a teaching and training task that was in full obedience to Matthew 28: 20.²⁷ They were making disciples, they were beginning in Jerusalem and, as a result of the foundation they laid, the early Christians "who were scattered went about preaching the word".²⁸

The apostles were foundation builders, church planters. As Burton concluded:

we infer that according to Paul's conception the work of an apostle of Christ was that of planting Christianity.²⁹

The roots of the Church in Argentina, for example, go back to the past century when men, convicted by the Holy Spirit and supported by churches in Europe and the United States, came and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ and founded congregations. If we gave those men the name "apostles", we could literally say that the church in Argentina is "built upon the foundation of the

²⁵ F. F. Bruce would include the "other" apostles with this limitation. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, 1961), p. 57.

²⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Signs of an Apostle* (London, 1970), pp. 39 f., 69 f.

²⁷ See especially Acts 2: 42; 4: 33; 5: 42 and 6: 2, 4, 7. Since after the dispersion of Acts 8 the spotlight rests briefly on Peter and then quickly shifts to Paul, we have little idea of the activity of the Twelve from then on.

²⁸ Acts 8: 4.

²⁹ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 580.

apostles (and prophets?³⁰), Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone". They must be first (1 Cor. 12: 28) in a very practical sense.

We cannot speak of the expansion of the church apart from the very concrete task of preaching and forming congregations of Christians, and the task that we see Paul occupied with in the book of Acts, is the same task that also occupied those who were responsible for planting the churches of which we now form part.

One distinction that Geldenhuys strongly argues for is that the other apostles were apostles of the *churches*, but never apostles of the *Lord* like the Twelve and Paul; he describes them as being "merely" representatives of the churches.³¹ In part he bases his argument on 2 Cor. 8: 23, where Paul states: "and as for our brethren, they are messengers (ἀπόστολος) of the churches." But such a distinction breaks down when we turn to I Thess. 2: 6, a passage already considered, where Paul speaks of himself and Silas as "apostles of Christ". The tendency to emphasize that the Twelve (and Paul) were sent out by the Lord, while the other apostles were sent out by men, ignores completely the work of the risen Christ and of the Spirit of God in the church.

Eph. 4: 11 lists the different categories of servants the ascended Lord gives to his church. If we took the passage at face value, we could conclude that the work of building up the body of Christ has been distributed among a number of functions, among which is the apostolic. Most commentators would state that the apostles and prophets were limited to one generation, but the *context* of the passage would not demand it. On the contrary, this passage would seem to support our earlier conclusions to the effect that the apostolic function is one of the fundamental and necessary provisions of God for the continued expansion of his church.

I would emphasize from this passage that apostleship is a gift of the ascended Christ. The apostle is not appointed by men any more than the pastor or teacher is. These are gifts mediated by the Holy Spirit of God, that carry the weight of the authority of Christ. Paul emphasizes in 1 Cor. 12: 28 that "God has appointed in the Church first apostles . . .". Christ initiated his work with the Twelve he especially chose, but he continues his work with others (apostles, teachers, pastors, etc.), whom he also calls and prepares.

V. CONCLUSION

Due to different historical circumstances, there are various words and concepts that some segments of the Christian church

³⁰ The possibility that the prophetic *function* would also have carried over into the present-day church will have to be the subject of another paper.

³¹ Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority*, p. 70.

avoid. They are words and concepts that appear in the Scriptures, but not in the congregational life of such groups. A good example of this would be the word "bishop", against which many denominations react for what they consider to be a falsification of the Biblical concept by the Roman Catholic Church. Another such word is apostle.

Nevertheless the evidence seems to point to what we could call the provision of an apostolic function for the expansion of the church, a function that would correspond to the missionary, both past and present, who works towards the communication of the gospel in areas where it has not been heard or has not taken root, and the establishment of congregations.

The present term "missionary" is a very confusing one. It describes everything from the secretaries and mechanics who support mission complexes, through the doctors, executives and engineers who manage them, and finally to the actual church planters themselves. We cannot call all missionaries "apostles", since that would rob the word of its meaning. But what we can do is return to a more Biblical standard for distinguishing those who work in different aspects of planting and building up churches.

A return to Biblical terminology might also encourage a return to Biblical practice. The apostolic task is a clear one, and there is much material to work from, especially in the Pauline literature, that would serve to clarify the goals and methods for the present-day apostle.

Buenos Aires, Argentina