

Apostles

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 6th May 2005

Introduction

In our studies in 1 Corinthians we have reached chapter 14 verse 1, which says "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." So we are told in the Scriptures that we are to desire eagerly the gifts of the Spirit. But this raises a question, What gifts should we be seeking for today? Are we to seek all the gifts that are mentioned in Chapter 12: apostles, prophets, teachers, workers, miracles, gifts of healing, speaking in tongues and interpreting? Or were some gifts given for a particular point in a church's history which and are no longer to be expected today?

This is an important question which has big implications for the life of the church as a whole, and our lives as individuals. I propose to tackle it by looking at the teaching of the Bible on apostles, Scripture and Signs and Wonders, before going on to consider the gifts of prophecy and tongues. For the rest of this talk I want to deal with the subject of apostles.

1. Eight truths about the apostles

Here are eight important things that we need to know about apostles:

1) The apostles were chosen by Christ

The first is that apostles were chosen by Christ himself. In Luke Chapter 6 we read that Jesus hand picked the twelve apostles. Verse 12 says "Jesus went up to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also

designated apostles."

Then the apostles are named. There was a specific group of people whom Jesus chose and there were twelve of them.

Then also there is Matthias who was appointed when Judas killed himself, which is recorded at the beginning of the book of Acts. And then also there was Saul who became Paul, who again was directly appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ. You remember how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He was about to persecute some Christians and Jesus himself appeared to him and he appointed him to be an apostle. Paul is quite clear that his appointment was not by men but by Jesus Christ. He says in Galatians 1 verse 1, "Paul, an apostle, sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead."

2) The apostles were gifted by Christ

The second thing to know about apostles is that they were gifted by Christ. He himself gave them the gifts that they needed to do the work he wanted them to do. This is recorded for us in Luke chapter 9 verses 1 – 2, which says, "When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

Jesus gave his apostles specific powers which were an extension of his own powers. Jesus had powers to drive out demons and to heal the sick, and he delegated those powers to the apostles. It is quite often said that Jesus has given all believers power to drive out demons and to heal the sick. But the Bible does not say that. It says he gave his apostles those powers and then he later on gave a wider group of 70 those same powers.

3) The apostles were the official witnesses of key events in Jesus' life

The third thing we see is that the apostles were the official witnesses of the key events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This is particularly clear from Acts Chapter 1 when the apostles needed to recognise another apostle to replace Judas who had killed himself. The qualifications are clearly laid out in Acts 1.21, where it is recorded that Peter said,

"Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning with

John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a *witness with us of his resurrection.*"

So the apostles were witnesses of the key events of Jesus' life and particularly witnesses of the resurrection. A person could not be an apostle if he was not a witness of the resurrection. This is the point that Paul makes in his defence of being an apostle. Although he did not know Jesus in his earthly life he was a witness of the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15.7 Paul says, "Then he (Jesus) appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." It is only because the risen Lord appeared to Paul that he could be called an apostle.

4) The apostles laid down the official teaching of Christianity

Fourthly, the apostles laid down the official teaching of Christianity. They are the ones who defined what Christianity is. This is very clear from the book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit has been poured out, it is Peter, the apostle, who stands up to explain what is happening. In Acts 2.42 we read, "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." Acts 4.2 says, "They (the High Priests) were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." Acts 4.33 says, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all."

These examples could be repeated many times. It was the apostles who gave the authoritative teaching which defined the Christian Gospel.

5) The apostles were the agents of God's revelation

This leads us to the fifth thing, which is that the apostles were agents of God's revelation. How do we know what the gospel is? How do we know what the message of Christianity is? We know because God revealed it to his apostles. If it were not for the work and writing of the apostles then we would not know what Christianity is all about. But because God revealed it to them, and they wrote down what God had revealed, we know it for ourselves.

Paul speaks about this in Ephesians chapter 3. In this passage he is talking about a "mystery", something which was hidden and has now been revealed, that through Christ Jew and Gentile are united together to become one new

people. This "mystery" has been revealed by God to the apostles and prophets of the New Testament period. He says in verses 2 to 5,

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

6) The apostles did signs and wonders

Sixthly, apostles did signs and wonders. I am planning to speak about the whole subject of signs and wonders in a future talk, but for now I want us to see the key place of apostles in the performance of signs and wonders in the New Testament. It is very striking as you read through the book of Acts that the signs and wonders that are recorded there are done exclusively (with just one exception which I shall mention in a moment) either by the apostles or by those upon whom the apostles laid their hands. Here are a few of the many examples which could be given:

Acts 2:43: "Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." Acts 5:12: "The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people." Acts 5:15-16: "As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed."

And so it goes on. Again and again it is through the apostles that these signs and wonders are done. In Acts 9 a man called Ananias who was paralysed is raised up by Peter. Then Dorcas the widow who died is raised from the dead by Peter. And there are many instances recorded in the book of Acts of Paul the apostle doing great signs and wonders.

Paul says that doing signs and wonders is a sign of being an apostle. In 2 Corinthians 12.12 he says: "The things that mark an apostle - signs, wonders and miracles - were done among you with great perseverance."

So we see that it is the apostles, and those upon whom they laid their hands,

and them alone, who did signs and wonders after Christ had gone up to heaven. Now I said there was one exception and the one exception was Ananias who was told by the Lord to go and lay his hands on Saul who became Paul so that he might receive his sight. And I think we can say that was an exception because Paul had been called to be an apostle and he needed someone to pray for him. God told Ananias to come and he prayed for him, as is recorded in Acts 9.12, and Paul was then able to see.

7) The apostles had power to convey gifts to others

We also see, seventhly, that not only did the apostles do signs and wonders in their own right but they had the power to convey the gift of doing signs and wonders to others. We read in Acts 6.6 that the apostles laid their hands upon the seven deacons who were chosen to serve the church, one of whom was Stephen. Then what do we find? Two verses later in Acts 6.8 it is recorded, "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among them." Because the apostles laid their hands on the deacons, the deacons are now doing signs and wonders as well! And Philip, another one of those who had the laying on of hands by the apostles, also did signs and wonders. In Acts 8.6 – 7 it is recorded, "When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed."

But Phillip, although he had the power to do signs and wonders, did not have the power to convey gifts. When there was a concern that there was not a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the believers in Samaria, the apostles came down and they laid their hands on them. The result is recorded in Acts 8 verse 17 where it says: "Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

And we read later on in Acts about Paul laying his hands upon believers in Ephesus and they then subsequently spoke in tongues.

8) The apostles laid the foundation for the church

The eighth and final thing to say about the apostles is this: the apostles are the foundation for the church. In Ephesians 2.19 – 20 the apostle Paul says, "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with

God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

So the Twelve plus Paul, (and maybe you could include Barnabas as well) this limited number who saw the risen Christ and to whom was given the revelation of what the gospel is, they are the ones who have laid that foundation for the church. And once that foundation has been laid it does not need to be laid again because it is there for all time. In the book of Revelation, chapter 21 verse 14 names of the twelve apostles are inscribed on the foundation of the City, the heavenly Jerusalem, the glorified church.

2. Lessons for us

There are a number of important lessons for us to learn from what we have seen about apostles.

1) There are no apostles today

The first thing to see is that there are no more apostles today. There cannot be any more apostles because an apostle is somebody who is defined in scripture as someone who has seen the Lord, and all those who saw the risen Lord have long since died.

This straightforward truth goes right in the face of many strands of Christian and pseudo-Christian thinking. For instance Mormonism believes in the continuation of spiritual gifts, including the gift of being an apostle. This religion regards Joseph Smith as its great apostle and prophet. He is supposed to have had further revelations from God and so this whole false religion has come into being.

Roman Catholicism also claims that the Pope and his Bishops are the successors to the apostles. Hence when the Pope sits on his throne and makes what they call his "ex cathedra" pronouncements, he is regarded as having given an infallible word. They say that the Pope can do this because he is in the "apostolic succession" from Peter. Although there is little evidence that Peter ever visited Rome, they claim that he is the first "Pope". They say that he laid his hands on his successor, who in turn laid his hands on the next Pope and so on, passing on the gift of apostleship from one to the next. And so it is said that the Pope is an apostle who can deliver infallible pronouncements.

But claims to have present day apostles are not confined to groups who would not call themselves evangelical. There are certain Pentecostal groups who describe themselves as "apostolic" churches. When they say this they do not mean what the historic creeds mean when they speak about the "apostolic church." When the creeds talk about the "apostolic church" they mean the church which was built on the foundation of the truth laid down by the apostles. But what these groups mean when they say they are "apostolic" churches is that they have got living apostles who tell them what to do and what to believe.

And there are some so-called house churches which have sprung up as a result of what has been labelled the charismatic movement from the 1960s. Many of these churches would say that all the gifts of the Spirit are for today, including the gift of an apostle. The "apostles" in these groups of churches are regarded as having authority over local churches, and in some instances they lay down what these churches should believe.

According to the teaching of Scripture there can be no apostles today. Whatever we might say about any other gifts, there can be doubt about this gift. We can say categorically there are no apostles today because the Scriptures define so clearly the qualifications for an apostles.

2) There can be no additions to Scripture

The second thing we can say is that because the apostles' role was to define the Gospel, if there are no more apostles there can be no more additions to the Gospel. There is no further revelation to be made. I hope to speak more about this when I speak about Scripture.

This is why the Christian cannot accept the Koran, because Mohammed lived 500 years after the Bible was completed. There is nothing further to be said. God has spoken. It is finished.

Joseph Smith, whom I have mentioned already, lived 1800 years after the Bible was finished. He thought he had a fresh revelation from God. But God has finished speaking because his apostles have all long since died and the Bible is complete.

3) There will be no more signs and wonders

Thirdly, if signs and wonders were to authenticate the apostles, and if there are no more apostles, then there will be no more true signs and wonders. I say no more true signs and wonders because the Bible does predict there will be signs and wonders but they will be false signs and wonders towards the end of time. The devil will prompt people to perform signs and wonders to get them to believe what he wants to say through them. Some of these will look very convincing. They may even be supernatural, but real signs and wonders have finished. How can I say that so dogmatically? Because their role was to authenticate the apostles and to authenticate Christ before them. They authenticated the revelation. Now that the revelation has been authenticated it does not need to be authenticated further.

4) We should pay close attention to the teaching of the apostles

The fourth lesson is that we should pay very close attention to the teaching of the apostles and submit to their authority. Now there are certain people who will say "I don't believe in Paul but I believe in Jesus." That is nonsense because Paul was Jesus' apostle and so were Peter and the other apostles. We only know the truth about Jesus Christ through his apostles, and through the associate of the apostles. Matthew and John were apostles. Mark was a very close associate of Peter's. Luke we know from the book of Acts was a close associate of Paul's. If it were not for the apostles and their close friends we would not have the gospels, nor would we have the letters. Without the apostles we would not have the New Testament and we would not have Christianity. And if you have got no Christianity you have got no salvation and you have got no real way of knowing how to live as a Christian. So listen to what God has said through his apostles.

Now if you are not yet a Christian the message to you is quite simply that what God has said through his apostles you need to accept as the very Word of God, word for word. Do not doubt it for a moment. Just believe it and accept and you will be saved.

And if you are a Christian already do not allow anybody to move you from your utter dependence upon what God has revealed once and for all through his apostles.

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