

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 29, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EPHESIANS 4:7,11

“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ
apportioned it... It was He Who gave some to be apostles...”

THE APOSTOLIC GIFT

Two young seminary students spent the summer before their senior year as short-term missionaries in Taiwan. They wanted to spend these three months on the mission field to discover whether or not this was the life to which God was calling them.

One enjoyed the experience tremendously! He adapted readily to the culture. He never became sick. He learned snatches of the language. The time flew by.

The second prospective missionary hated the food, learned only a few words of the language, became ill on three different occasions, and wanted to spend most of his time with the Americans rather than with the nationals. At the end he exclaimed, “I never would make a successful missionary!” His companion could hardly wait to apply to his denominations Mission Board to return to Taiwan after his ordination.

For years Christians have spoken of the missionary “call.” Increasingly today we speak of the missionary “gift” which involves communicating the Gospel from one culture to another. Also, Christians are more and more identifying the missionary gift with the apostolic gift.

The word “apostle” is derived from the Greek verb, “apostello,” which means “to send forth” or “commission.” So, in the New Testament an “apostle” is literally “someone commissioned and sent forth by Christ.” It is significant to note, I think, that while the word “apostle” comes from the Greek verb “to send forth”, the word “missionary” comes from the Latin verb “niitto” which also means “to send forth”! So linguistically “apostle” and “missionary” mean exactly the same thing -- the “missionary—apostle” is a “person commissioned and sent forth by Christ.”

The word “apostle” occurs more than 80 times in the New Testament. Some believe that it refers to an office that died out when the original “apostles” passed away; but on the other hand, biblical scholars increasingly believe that the gift did not die out. Indeed, John Calvin wrote that God raised up apostles “on particular occasions, when required by the necessity of the times, as He has done in our own time.” (Institutes, Book IV, Chapter 2).

Did the gift die out, or is it a continuing gift today? Perhaps the answer is “yes” to both questions. In its restricted usage, the office has finished; in its broader meaning, the gift is still operative. Officially the apostolate ended with the Twelve; unofficially, the apostolic gift continues throughout the centuries and down to today as the missionary gift.

1. Let us look for a moment at the restricted “official” usage of the word “apostle.” In many ways, the original twelve apostles were unique.

a. They had been with Jesus from the beginning. When Peter listed qualifications for a replacement for Judas Iscariot, he said, “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...” (Acts 1:21,22).

b. They had a personal call from Christ. Mark tells us that our Lord “selected twelve -- designating them apostles -- that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach...” (3:14). After His resurrection He said to them, “As the Father has sent Me, so I am now sending you” (John 20:21).

c. They were witnesses of the Resurrection. Peter, in listing an apostle’s qualifications, said that he must “be a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:22).

d. These twelve apostles laid the doctrinal foundation of the Church. Jesus had promised them: “The Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you... When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). The major fulfilment of this promise was the writing of the New Testament Scriptures, as the apostolic authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit. And by the year 300 A.D. Christians admitted into the New Testament only those 27 books which they knew had emanated from the apostolic circle, or from their close associates such as Mark, Luke, and James, the brother of Jesus.

2. Let us look now at the broader “unofficial” usage of the term “apostle” in the New Testament. We readily admit that the original twelve apostles have a unique place in Christian history. We read in Revelation 21 that they will be permanently commemorated when their names will be inscribed on the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem. We read, “The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:14).

However, the Twelve were not the only apostles. 1 Corinthians 15 mentions that after His resurrection our Lord appeared to “the Twelve” and then also to “all the apostles”, indicating that there were apostles other than the Twelve (1 Corinthians 15:5,7). Furthermore, Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11:13 warns against “false apostles”; and this would be nonsensical if apostles were limited to the Twelve.

Indeed, several, other than the Twelve, are mentioned by name as apostles. They include Matthias (Acts 1:26), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junias who, we read, were “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7), Timothy and Silas (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:6), James, the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1:19); and, of course, preeminently, Paul. Paul emphatically claimed to be an apostle, appointed so by the Lord, but he never makes the claim of having been numbered with the Twelve. Although, on the road to Damascus, he had been a witness of the risen Christ, and although his letters are included in the New Testament, nevertheless he did not

qualify for apostleship in its restricted, official sense, because at no time had he accompanied our Lord during the three years of His earthly ministry.

But listen to what Paul says in writing to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 9:1-3):

I am an apostle, God's messenger, responsible to no mere man. I am one who has actually seen Jesus our Lord with my own eyes. And your changed lives are the result of my hard work for Him. If in the opinion of others, I am not an apostle, I certainly am to you, for you have been won to Christ through me. This is my answer to those who question my rights.

Now notice carefully what Paul is saying here. He is not making the claim that he is one of the Twelve; he is simply presenting his credentials as a missionary. Here is Paul, a Jewish Christian, who has been commissioned and sent forth by Christ as a missionary to the pagan Greek city of Corinth; and there at Corinth he had led people to Christ and planted a Christian church, as he did also in many other cities.

And so, we may conclude that the missionary gift is the continuing function of the apostleship. And through the 20 centuries of Christian history, as well as today, many of God's gifted servants have been, and are, true apostles by being missionaries to other lands and cultures. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia in the article entitled "Ministry" says this: "In the New Testament and in the other literature of the early Church, the word 'apostle' is used in a narrower and in a wider sense. The wider use of the word has descended to the present day; 'apostles' or 'holy apostles' is still the name for missionaries in the Greek Orthodox Church."

I believe that Paul's ministry and that of his companions is recorded in great detail in the Acts of the Apostles because he and they provide the typical example and role model for the exceedingly important permanent ministry of the noble band of missionaries who preach the Gospel and plant Christian churches in every part of the world amongst those who have never heard of Jesus.

3. Let us examine the nature of the missionary gift today. Remember that 2.5 billion people on this planet have never yet heard the Gospel, so we can be assured that God in His love has gifted countless Christian believers with the gift and potential of being successful missionaries. We might define the gift of missionary as the special ability that God gives to some members of the Body of Christ to minister whatever other spiritual gifts they have in a second culture.

Most Christians, as most human beings, are mono-cultural, that is to say, they are born and raised and die among only one kind of people. They may, of course, come into contact with other cultures from time to time. They may travel abroad and enjoy seeing other kinds of people. They may even have learned to speak another language fairly fluently. And yet, basically they are still mono-cultural.

A pastor on a round-the-world trip to observe missionary work noticed time and time again in many countries that he was the object of curious glances. Especially did people stare at his blonde wife. The couple enjoyed retreating at the close of each day to some American hotel in major cities, and they would always say, "We can stand the cultural shock during the day if we can get back to a little bit of American food and life each evening!" You see, that couple were strictly mono-cultural, and they would never have made successful missionaries.

On the other hand, people with the gift of missionary not only enjoy coming into contact with other cultures, they actually enjoy living in another culture while cutting ties with their homeland on a long-term basis. Most missionaries are abroad for at least four years at a stretch, and many are away for five or even ten years. Upon first going to the mission field, they get "culture shock," but they recover rapidly!

They learn the language more rapidly than those without the gift. Years ago, I knew an Irish missionary who joined the staff of the Alpine Mission to France. She had come to feel that she possessed the missionary gift, but when the challenging call came to go to France, she was totally dismayed, because at school in Dublin, French was one of the subjects she found most difficult, and she did not do well in it at all. However, when she went to France, a momentous change occurred -- she became an honor student in language school! And this confirmed her "call" in a remarkable way. Before long she was completely fluent in French, and she would say with tongue in cheek, "I even know all the slang words, the tones of voice and the body language that is not described in the text books!"

Gifted missionaries feel at home with people of the second culture; and best of all, they are soon accepted by the others as "one of us."

While intercultural contact is enriching for all of us, I am sure that God does not expect every Christian to identify with a second culture. He gives the gift of missionary only to some. To how many? We don't know. Would you think that one percent of Christians would possess this gift - that one Christian out of every 100 would be called by God to be a missionary? That does not seem unreasonable in light of the fact that 2.5 billion people have never yet heard the name of Jesus. There are about 50 million active Christian adults in the United States today, so that would mean that 500,000 of them would be gifted to be missionaries. How many American Christians are actually on the mission field today? --- 40,000 --- less than one-tenth of one percent --- one Christian out of every 1,250!

What may we conclude from this? Surely this -- that thousands upon thousands of believers have not discovered their gift of missionary; or, that having discovered it, and felt the "call," they are simply not prepared to pay the price involved!

And yet, we must resist the temptation to encourage just anyone at all to volunteer for overseas missionary service. Sad to say, there are some missionaries who have been on the field for 30 years who never had the gift in the first place. Many of them went abroad for the wrong reasons, and both their home church and the mission field would have been better off if they had stayed at home. The mission field is something like the Marine Corps: God needs a few good, choice, gifted men and women. I would go so far as to say that it is dangerous to make an appeal

at a missionary conference that says, “You must go to the mission field unless God calls you to stay home!” It is better to challenge people, especially young people, to discover whether or not they have this spiritual gift to be a missionary-apostle.

Today worldwide travel is relatively easy, and a person can spend time in another culture, as did the two young men I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, who spent a summer in Taiwan. A short term on some mission field is an excellent way to discover whether or not one has the gift to be a missionary, and denominational mission boards are now making it possible for candidates to test their call in this way.

Also, retired persons with special skills are being sought out as potential short-term workers, especially in third-world countries. Maybe some of you who are approaching retirement will catch the vision of a new and exciting ministry in some distant land! That splendid organization called “InterChristo” will place candidates where their skills can best be utilized. Teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, agricultural experts, laboratory technicians, accountants, people with computer experience, and all sorts of manual skills are always being sought after. One of my pipe dreams is to teach in a seminary in Africa for a couple of years after I finally “retire”!

But God needs the gifted and committed young Christians to go to the mission field. It calls for stern discipline and intensive training, but the rewards can be unspeakably great! I wonder if someone under the sound of my voice at this moment feels that divinely-inspired urge to offer himself or herself for this most glorious task! If you do, then for the sake of a dying world, don’t shut your eyes to the vision, or your ears to the call.

Almost a century ago on a Sabbath morning in a little rural Presbyterian Church in Ireland, it was Missionary Sunday. A little boy sat alone in a pew, and when the missionary offering was announced, he had nothing to give; but, taking a piece of paper from his pocket, he hastily scribbled down three words:

“I give myself”

and then he signed his name and placed the slip of paper in the offering plate. That boy grew up to be Dr. William Fulton, one of Ireland’s finest gifts to the Christian Church in the great land of China, where he served as a missionary for more than [unintelligible] years.

Will someone here today say,

“I give myself”

And to all of us I say -- our money can go where we can never go; our resources, backed up by our fervent prayers, can send others in our name. That is why the missions program of Faith Church is perhaps the most important single item in our total budget, because God will bless us here at home, and provide for all our needs if we support His work faithfully and sacrificially in “the regions beyond.”

And do remember this -- and it is the final sentence of the sermon:

No one has the right to hear the Gospel twice until everyone has heard it once!

AMEN.