

Apostolic Teams Today - November 1981

Alvin Tofler's 1970 bestseller, *Future Shock*, begins: 'In three short decades between now and the 21st century, millions of ordinary psychologically normal people will face an abrupt collision with the future. Many citizens of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations will find it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterises our time. For them, the future will have arrived too soon'. Tofler's prediction is proving accurate. Indeed, of those 'three short decades', one has already passed. Such is the climate of change that Kenneth Galbraith has rightly called this 'the age of uncertainty'. It is into this complex and changing society that God is speaking. The church of Jesus Christ may appear ill-fitted for such an hour. Certainly many Christians seem more willing than respond to present-day revelation. Happily there are many more who, amid the changes and challenges of this generation, are crying afresh with the prophet of old, 'Speak, Lord your servant is listening'. Nothing is more exciting than the realisation that the unchanging God has a plan of restoration destined to succeed despite all the shifting sands of time. We know that, before the return of Christ, all the promises and prophecies of God will find their fulfilment in a generation of those who love his name. 'He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets' (Acts 3:21).

A Prophetic Generation

Jesus knew that the law and the prophets had all been speaking of him. The apostles, too, realised that Old Testament prophecy was being dramatically worked out in their generation. Peter saw, in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the prophecies of Joel finding initial fulfilment (Acts 2:16). James recognised in the coming in of the Gentiles an indication that prophecy was being fulfilled concerning the rebuilding of the Tabernacle of David (Acts 15:13-16). This unfolding revelation to the early apostles provided the kind of prophetic thrust to the early church that Zechariah, Haggai and others had provided for the rebuilding of Jerusalem hundreds of years before. There is a sense of prophetic fullness in our generation, too. What is happening in Africa, Latin America, South East Asia and Europe represents a wind of change in the church. There is a quickening of expectancy. The church is poised for a new surge forward to greater growth than ever. Thousands upon thousands are to enter the kingdom of God. Significantly, at the same time, fundamental questions concerning the nature of the church and its ministries are being asked. Certainly the existing religious structures are proving inadequate for our time, restricted as they often are by non-biblical forms and traditions as well as much questionable theology. The pressured 80's call for a new dynamic. God's way is still Holy Spirit anointed men and women. In particular, the key to the progress of the church today lies in a re-emergence of apostolic companies, close knit groups of gifted ministries who will reap a harvest and establish the community of God as churches across the world. Such expansion will not be achieved through one or two individuals but through the joining together of many individuals for the advance of the gospel 'Apostolic ministry is not a flash of brilliant individualism but rather a glorious teamwork' (W.A.C. Rowe). The primary ministries, around which

the others gathered in New Testament times, were the apostles and prophets. The last 75 years have seen a rapid acceleration in God's programme of restoration of the church, with great movements of the Holy Spirit around the world restoring much truth that has been lost, and not least our understanding of apostles and apostolic teams in relation to the building of the church.

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How The House Is Built

Solomon, who built that early house of God, the Temple, gives us some important clues when he says, 'By wisdom a house is built, by understanding it is established, and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches' (Prov 24:3). The building of God's house calls for wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Wisdom is especially the gift of the apostle, who is the architect or strategist of the operation. Paul referred to himself as 'a wise master-builder'. Then we have the understanding of the prophet, who brings his unique insight and revelation of God's counsel to the building operation, and so keeps the work on the right track. Finally, there is the knowledge of the teacher by which the rooms inside are furnished and adorned. What we learn from Solomon is confirmed by Paul, when he sets out the order and functioning of ministries in the church— 'first apostles, second prophets, third teachers . .' (1 Cor 12:28). These three are indispensable ministries in the apostolic team. Now we can see a typical team beginning to take shape. It consists of those God joins to the apostle for a specific task and over whom he has undisputed authority whilst this task is being accomplished. We have an example in Paul, who was constantly sending men out and calling them back, as well as commissioning them for new tasks (Eph 6:21-22; Phil 2:19; 2 Tim 4:21; Tit 1:5 etc).

The Team Develops

Romans 16 reveals that apostolic teams are not only comprised of apostles, prophets and teachers. Many other ministries play their parts, some over a prolonged period of time, others for shorter periods. Some will serve administratively, others will be musicians, others gifted in counselling others fulfilling a ministry of care to the afflicted, while yet others will excel in healing and miracles. To function effectively, an apostolic team must be free of selfish ambition. The commitment of its members is to God and to each other, their personal interests yielding to the greater interests of God's kingdom. There is no room for the worldly lust for prominence or prestige. The commitment of team members will be expressed in mutual love, acceptance and care. They will at all times be loyal, covering each other in times of accusation, pressure or need. Working together requires mutual submission. No team man will attempt to prove himself capable in all areas of ministry but will gladly make room for his colleagues to exercise their gift in God to complement his own. Neither can there be place for competitive attitudes between different apostolic teams. All must be joined in heart and mind to see the churches of God established. Apostles must be willing to release men to other teams for specific tasks, just as Silas and Judas went from Jerusalem to join Paul's company for a season. Such flexibility will safeguard the

apostolic companies from rigidity, exclusive relationship, partisanship and wrong attitudes. At the same time the fellowship between the teams will promote greater growth and safeguard the unity of heart and purpose in them all.

Known By Their Fruit

A truly apostolic team will produce apostolic results. The communities into which they enter will be dramatically affected by the gospel of the kingdom. There will be large numbers of persons following after God, new ministries emerging, elders being established and churches being multiplied. Some of these strong churches will in turn become base churches from which the apostles can travel out with their teams. In the New Testament such bases were Jerusalem, Antioch and, later on, Ephesus. Being significant centres of population in their time, the word of the gospel was carried out from these major centres into the surrounding regions. We should expect a similar pattern in our own day. Significant breakthroughs of the gospel will take place in major cities such as London, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, Oslo, Kampala, Delhi, Chicago, New York and the like, and, in some of these, apostolic team bases will be established. When this occurs, gifted Christians will move to such centres from other areas. God has good reasons for locating these ministries together within the city. Their proximity will provide both greater interaction and flow of ministry. From their fellowship will come a stirring of faith, a receiving of direction and revelation from God and so, in the end, the churches of God at large will be the better served. Many faithful and loyal men are struggling alone today. Being unrelated, they are putting forth great effort and reaping little reward. The frustration and pressure produced by their individuality would disappear if they were joined to a team.

Authority

God's principle at every level of spiritual ministry is that of plurality, but with distinct leadership. This is true in the Godhead itself, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain co-equal in essence. In function, however, Jesus declared that he was at all times submitted to the Father. The same pattern was apparent in the context of apostolic team ministry. The apostles did not lord it over the other ministries joined to them, neither was there a power struggle within the teams. There was the recognition of each man's gift and ministry. Without the other ministries, the apostles would have been severely hampered in their ability to lay the foundation of the church. As well as the recognition of the team members' equal worth in the variety of their ministries, clear leadership was recognised in the authority resting on the apostles to whom they were joined.

Team Discipleship

In Paul's relationship with Timothy we have the classic example of the discipling of an emerging apostle. From his earliest days, Timothy had had a grounding in the Scriptures through his grandmother and mother. In addition, he was clearly called by the prophetic word of God to the ministry (2 Tim 3:15; 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14). Then he experienced the necessary discipline of church life, from which he was separated to go out to work under Paul, being 'well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium' (Acts 16:2). From this point on,

Timothy's training took on a new dimension. Paul was not only imparting truth to him but also giving him scope to exercise the gift of God that was in him. In fact, Paul was discipling Timothy in the same way that he himself, at one time, had been trained under Barnabas (Acts 11:25-26). Our finest training is in the school of experience. How interesting that Mark described the choosing of the disciples by Jesus as being primarily 'to be with him', before he gave them power to go and proclaim his word. Being joined to men in the living situation of team ministry does more for a man than years in a classroom being instructed in mere theories. In this 'age of uncertainty', this generation where 'the future has arrived for many too soon', let us rejoice that God is raising up apostolic teams, men of gift and power, wisdom and insight to meet the challenges of our time. They will dynamically advance the kingdom of God throughout the world until the mountain of the Lord's house is the highest of the mountains; until the nations of the world stream to the church to know the ways of God