

APOSTLE

The general meaning of apostle:

The word "apostle" is a transliteration of the Greek "*apostolos*" (ἀπόστολος). In a very general sense *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος) refers to "one sent on a mission" or "a messenger". In this sense it is clear that "apostle" has a broader meaning than the twelve.

The following are examples of this broader meaning.

1. Philippians 2:25 Epaphroditus is called an *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος) (translated as messenger) of a church
2. II Corinthians 8:22-23 - Paul's messengers to the churches are called *apostoloi* (ἀπόστολοι)
3. Romans 16:7 - some see "the apostles" (τοῖς ἀποστόλοις) as roughly equivalent to "missionaries"
4. Hebrews 3:1 *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος) is used of Jesus - emphasizing that He is the one sent by God

Cf. John 3:34 "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure."

John 5:36-37 ³⁶ "But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish-- the very works that I do-- testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. ³⁷ "And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form.

John 20:21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

General usage of a term, however, is not adequate to define a word's meaning in the NT. "Of course the word *apostle* can extend beyond the twelve plus Paul, 'Lord' can extend beyond Jesus, and 'elders' and 'deacons' can extend beyond ecclesiastical office/functions, and so forth. "The

Rev 11/1/13

primary reason [*for this*] is obvious: nascent Christianity had to use the vocabulary into which it was born, and its own specialized use of terms did not immediately displace the larger semantic range of the terms employed. As a result, attempts to establish what apostleship means for Paul by simply appealing to the full semantic range of the word as it is found in his writings is deeply flawed at the methodological level" (D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 89-90).

Apostle as a technical term:

Examination of other NT passages reveal that "apostle" was also a technical term for a select group of gifted individuals **(1)** who had seen the resurrected Lord (the twelve - Acts 1:21-26; Paul - I Cor. 9:1; 15:8-9; cf. Paul's conversion in Acts. 9:1-6 where he sees the Lord) and **(2)** had been commissioned specifically by Jesus for their mission (the twelve - Lk. 6:13; Acts 1:2; Paul - Ro. 1:1; Matthias, chosen by the Lord by lots - Acts 1:24-26).

How many apostles were there?

1) **The apostolic band consisted of the twelve** (Acts 1:26; Rev. 21:14; they are listed in Matt 10:2-4; Lk. 6:13-16). The apostles themselves recognized that there was a need to make up their number in order to replace Judas after his death (Acts 1:21-26).

2) **Paul** saw his apostleship as equal to the twelve in all respects (I Cor. 4:9; 9:5; 15:7-9; II Cor. 11:5; 12:11) except that he did not see himself as worthy of being part of the twelve due to the lateness of his conversion and call (I Cor. 15:8).

3) **James** is also called an apostle by Paul (Gal. 1:19). He had surely seen the resurrected Christ (I Cor. 15:7) and held an authoritative position in the early church, though he does not refer to himself as an apostle (Ja. 1:1).

4) The "twelve," Paul, and "**all the apostles**" are mentioned in I Corinthians 15:5-9 demonstrating that the number of apostles was not limited to the twelve and Paul alone. But this is also a clear indicator that

Rev 11/1/13

the twelve apostles were a distinct group among all who were called apostles - a group in which Paul was not included.

5) II Corinthians 11:13 and Revelation 2:2 mentions false apostles (*apostoloi* - ἀπόστολοι) implying that the number of apostles was not definitive for if it had been, a false prophet could have been easily recognized.

6) **Barnabas** is called an apostle (Acts 14:4, 14), though some see this as a general usage of the term.

Conclusion:

It is often difficult to determine if the word "apostle" is being used in a general sense or a technical one. Some would place all but the twelve and Paul outside of this select group of gifted men. Others do not.

The Apostles' authority:

It is clear that the twelve retained a unique position in the early church, even though Paul had the same authority that they did.

Their authority is seen in that:

1) they were appointed by Jesus Himself (Lk. 6:13; Mk. 3:14; Lk. 9:1; Acts 1:2; Ro. 1:1; I Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; I Tim. 2:7; II Tim. 1:11)

2) they were given specific orders by Christ after the resurrection (Acts 1:2)

3) they were identified as the leaders of the Christian movement by the Jewish religious authorities (Acts 5:17 ff.)

4) they had jurisdiction over the church as a whole (Acts 2:42; 6:1-7; 8:14-15; 9:27; 11:1; 15:2-6, 22-23; 16:4)

5) the names of the twelve apostles appear on the twelve foundation stones of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14)

6) their work was often accompanied by wonders and signs that substantiated their ministry (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 14:8-10; II Cor. 12:12; Gal. 1:19) in the same way that miracles substantiated the claims of the OT prophets.

7) In I Corinthians 12:28 it says "And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues." If the above observations are correct it would not be hard to imagine why Paul would list "apostle" *first*.

The nature of the Apostles' ministry:

1) Because of their unique calling, apostles held an authoritative position in the church (I Thess. 2:5-6; Acts 15:1-6; 16:4).

2) As eye-witnesses of the resurrected Christ they were primarily to preach the gospel (Acts 4:33 cf. Mk. 3:14) but were also to equip believers for service (Eph. 4:11-12).

3) They were foundational in establishing the early church (Eph. 2:19-22) for they were recipients of divine revelation (Eph. 3:4-7; Jude 1:17-18) and wrote the majority of the NT.

4) They had the same authority as the OT prophets and Christ (II Pet. 3:1-2; Jude 1:17) [though they were not infallible in all they did (Gal. 2:11-14)].

The duration of the gift of apostleship:

Although no specific verse states that the gift of apostleship would end, *once Christ ascended into heaven the prerequisite of being an eyewitness of the resurrection could no longer be met.*

Although Paul saw Christ after the ascension, He considered Himself to be the last to have seen Him (I Cor. 15:3-8). For this reason he says that he was untimely born, for Christ appeared to him at a time when post-

Rev 11/1/13

resurrection appearances were believed to have ended (see notes on I Cor. 15:1-8). Some may object to this by saying that Jesus also appeared to John on Patmos (Rev. 1:11-17) long after Paul. However, Jesus' appearance to John was a vision (as evidenced by Rev. 1:10 where John clearly says he was "in the Spirit") not a bodily, post resurrection appearance as Paul's was (I Cor. 15:8 - note that Paul's whole argument is that he had seen the Lord in the same manner that the others had).

Furthermore, one is hard-pressed to use John's experience as a proof-text to show that Christ appears in visions today. John's vision is unique for it was revelatory in nature, and what he saw became incorporated in Scripture. The only other appearance of Christ supported in Scripture is His second coming (Matt. 24:22-27).

In addition, since *the apostles' ministry was foundational in establishing the church in both practice and doctrine, we are lead to conclude that the gift ended once these objectives were accomplished.* If we were to ask, how the foundation for the church is established today, the answer would be: in the deposit of writings that the apostles left behind.

As long as "apostles" refers to a select group (the twelve plus Paul) whose positions and functions cannot be duplicated after their demise, there is a prima facie case for saying at least one of the gifts passed away at the end of the first generation. There is therefore also precedence for asking if other gifts in Paul's day are not operative in our day (D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 88).

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar NT Commentary), 83, 84, 214
2. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*