

THE
CIRCLE
OF THE
TWELVE

by JOHN H. ESSEX

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THERE are many matters in God's Word which, though not directly connected with our salvation, are nevertheless interesting as subjects for study to the one who desires to be fully "equipped, fitted out for every good act" (2 Tim. 3:16). One of these items we have chosen to call "The Circle of Twelve," for reasons which will become evident as we proceed.

When Jesus chose His twelve disciples, He did not call them all at the same time. In Matthew 4 we read of the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John but we have to pass through nearly five more chapters before we come to the call of Matthew himself (Matt. 9:9), and he was not necessarily the last to be called.

In the period covered by the early chapters of the first book of the New Testament we find Jesus performing many miracles, including the healing of the sick and the casting out of evil spirits. WE DO NOT READ OF HIS FOLLOWERS DOING ANY MIRACLES until we come to the tenth chapter which opens with this very significant sentence, "And calling His twelve disciples to Him, He gives them authority over unclean spirits, so as to be casting them out, and to be curing every disease and every debility." Immediately after this verse come the names of the **Twelve** and for the first time they are called **apostles**.

The Greek verb "apostello" means "to send officially, with authority for the execution of some task," or, more simply, "to commission," and an **apostle** is one who has been so commissioned.

And so we read in the next few verses, "These **twelve** Jesus commissions, charging them, saying 'You should not go off into a road of the nations, and into a city of the Samaritans you should not be entering. Yet rather be going to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Now go and be proclaiming, saying, "The kingdom of the heavens has drawn near!" Be curing the infirm, be rousing the dead, be cleansing lepers, be casting out demons. You got gratuitously; be giving gratuitously.'"

Luke makes it clear that when Jesus came to select the **twelve** out of a greater number, and then to name them "apostles also" the twelve were selected all together, and were commissioned together. And the Lord did this after a night throughout which He was in the prayer of God (Luke 6:12-16). Thus, though the twelve were called individually, they were chosen as a whole, and were commissioned to function as a whole.

The accounts of Mark (6:19) and Luke (9:6) show that the disciples fulfilled their commission, casting out demons and curing diseases. But what effect did the possession of these powers have upon them? It lifted them up beyond measure in their own estimations, so that they began to dispute among themselves as to which would be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus was constrained to rebuke them for these gifts had been bestowed upon them for the blessing of others, and not for their own exaltation.

Also, in order to restore them to a sense of reality, and to teach them a valuable lesson, Jesus caused them to have a remarkable failure. It is recorded for us in Matt. 17:14-18; Mark 9:14-29; and Luke 9:37-43. In each account it immediately follows the transfiguration when Jesus purposely divided His disciples by taking three with Him into the mountain and leaving nine behind. It was while Peter, James and John were away that some, or all, of the remaining nine were unable to cast out a demon from a man who was possessed. Jesus subsequently indicated that their failure was due to lack of faith, but it was also an indication that their powers would only remain so long as the circle of twelve was intact. At least, so it proved.

For what happened when the circle was broken by the defection of Judas? Miracles and healings by the disciples abruptly ceased. Their bravery just as suddenly vanished and fear fell upon them all. In the hour of their Master's greatest trial they forsook Him and fled. Peter, who had just previously declared, "And if ever I must die with Thee, I will in no circumstances be renouncing Thee" (Matt. 26:35), actually denied his Lord three times and his lips were fouled with oaths and with cursings. (Matt. 26:74).

The crucifixion filled the disciples with despair which is reflected in the words of the two, who were joined by a

stranger on the way to Emmaus, " We expected that He is the One about to be redeeming Israel." But the Lord spent the period between His resurrection and His ascension in comforting them, and in preparing them for a further ministry by promising that they should be obtaining power again at the coming of the holy spirit, and that they should be His witnesses in Jerusalem, as well as in entire Judea and Samaria, and to the limits of the land (Acts 1 : 8).

But before power could be returned to them, it was essential that the ordained number of **twelve** be restored, and so Matthias was chosen by lot to fill the place of Judas Iscariot. This is described for us in Acts 1 : 26, and the very next verse tells of the coming of the holy spirit, and with it the gift of tongues in addition to the powers previously possessed. How bold are the disciples now! And what a time of rejoicing is this for them! For the Kingdom has again drawn nigh, and is even at the door. Peter, with a full heart, declares that this manifestation of the holy spirit is actually that which was referred to by the prophet Joel when he spoke of the last days that were to precede the advent of the Lord.

Can we imagine the joy of the apostles at this time? Their ministry was bearing its fruit daily before their eyes. In one day alone, three thousand souls were baptised. Many miracles were performed, as when the Lord Himself had been with them. One of the most notable was the healing at the temple of the lame man who had been infirm for forty years. Persecutions by the Pharisees could not daunt the disciples nor hinder their preaching; imprisonment by the rulers could not stop them from working miracles. Even the death of Stephen could not diminish their powers, for Stephen was not one of the Twelve, and his martyrdom did not break the circle. Indeed, it was after Stephen's decease that Peter performed two of his greatest miracles, in the curing of the paralytic Eneas and the raising of Tabitha from the dead (both recorded in Acts 9).

But it was not long before the circle of twelve apostles of the Kingdom was again broken, this time by the killing of James by Herod (Acts 12 : 2) **and the number was not restored.** When the circle is made up for the third time, by the resurrection of the sleeping Apostles from the dead, it will be without possibility of further disruption, for the

Kingdom will indeed be then present in all its power and splendour, and the twelve will be together on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). This, perhaps their greatest task, will be carried out by them as the **complete twelve**.

Meanwhile what was the effect of this second breaking of the circle? Did the remaining eleven members continue their ministry unaffected by the loss of one of their number? We find the answer in the experience of Peter, who was thrown into jail. When the Apostles had been imprisoned before, the jail could not hold them. They had been released the same night (Acts 5:17-21), and the next morning were speaking in the temple as boldly as ever. With that memory still fresh, do we suppose that Peter would sleep on the first night after he was thrown into prison again? But these were the days of unleavened bread (Acts 12:3), and Herod kept him in prison until after the Passover should be over—two or three days at least. And it was only in the last night that he was released, and, after reporting his deliverance to those gathered in the house of the mother of Mark, **he went to a different place**. There was no bold preaching in the temple this time, and we read of no more wonderful miracles being performed by any of the eleven. Instead, we read of a further call to Saul and Barnabas, for, in Acts 13:2, the holy spirit said, "By all means sever to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Consideration of these facts should dispel any illusions we may once have had that Saul was chosen to fill the place left vacant by Judas. Saul is not one of the Twelve. May we conclude by quoting a comment in the Concordant Version on Acts 13:2. (C.V. Commentary, page 198). It reads:

"The severance of Barnabas and Saul by the spirit is the prelude to an entirely new departure in the book of Acts. The commission entrusted to the twelve apostles has been attempted and their testimony rejected. They went to the limits of the land of Israel. Beyond this they did not venture. Jerusalem in Judea now gives place to Antioch outside the land. The message now goes to the dispersion among the nations and to the proselytes and even to the nations themselves, and continues until it becomes manifest that

the Jews outside the land refuse the Messiah, even as those in the land have done. THIS MINISTRY IS CARRIED ON BY AN ENTIRELY NEW SET OF APOSTLES (capitals ours). The Twelve have no part in it. Saul, or Paul as he is now called, takes the place of Peter in this new apostolic group."

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P.O. Box 449
Almont, Michigan 48003