
Are There Apostles Today?

Hywel Jones

It is a widely known fact that the term “apostle” is not used exclusively of “the Twelve” in the New Testament (Romans 16:7). That is not to be wondered at for the term represents a common enough reality and concept in the first century, meaning “to be sent from another as his representative”. However, it is to be realised and remembered that not all “apostles” are “sent ones” in the same sense, nor are they all of a single kind. It is important to ask and to note in each case who did the sending and how or in what circumstances people were sent. Attention should also be paid as to why or on what mission they were sent. When this is done, we see that the Lord Jesus was sent personally by His Father; “the Twelve” were sent personally by the Lord (and there are obvious differences between the Lord and “the Twelve”, together with their respective tasks); Barnabas and Epaphroditus were sent by the churches of Antioch and Philippi respectively, as were others by other churches, for example, the messengers of the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 8:23), and there are yet others who are termed “sent ones”, though who sent them, how and why they were sent is not specified in the New Testament. In studying the subject of apostleship, and doing so particularly in the present climate of deep disagreement, it is so important to make these distinctions. Otherwise, confusion will become worse confounded. An example of the importance of this procedure is in 1 Thessalonians 2:6, where Paul, Silas and Timothy are described as “apostles of Christ”. There are differences to be noted here between the three mentioned in terms of their being sent.

However, even when this kind of discrimination characterises our study of the New Testament, not only is the disagreement over “apostles today” not resolved, but conflict continues and even intensifies. This is chiefly because the real crux of the debate is not focussed on with precision, let alone examined. For example, it is possible for someone who studies the New Testament on this matter to arrive at the following framework for the uses of the term apostle in those sacred writings, namely, the Lord Himself, “the Twelve”, and a group of church-commissioned evangelists, missionaries or inter-church messengers. Now, such an outline has no obvious point of contact with that emphasis on apostles and apostolic ministry which is so characteristic of the contemporary Charismatic movement broadly considered. This is because the crux of the conflict is not touched on. Where does it lie? It is to be found in two matters which, though they are capable of being distinguished for the purposes of teaching and study, become closely inter-related in the case which is presented in favour of “apostles today”. These are:

The nature of Paul’s apostleship

The kind of apostles referred to in Ephesians 4:11.

It has been said that “the onus clearly rests on those who assert that apostles were only intended to be a temporary institution, to prove it from the Scripture”. This is the aim in this article and its achievement will be attempted by examining each of these two points in turn.

The Nature of Paul’s Apostleship

One contemporary charismatic leader, namely Mr. Arthur Wallis, has written as follows in **Restoration** magazine:

“In considering the question ‘apostles today’, it is crucial to see that Paul belonged to a third distinct class of apostle.”

The two other classes implied in this quotation are the Lord and “the Twelve”. This statement is most helpful, both in its clarity and also in its emphatic nature. The first step in the case presented for “apostles today” is to dissociate Paul from “the Twelve” (with whom it is claimed he cannot be properly bracketed anyway) and to associate with Paul all the others who are termed apostles in the New Testament. So, the framework that results is the Lord, “the Twelve” and then Paul and the rest. In this way a different kind of apostolic succession becomes possible and, of course, in the event, actual.

This framework will be examined, of course, by necessary implication when the narrower issue, namely Paul’s apostleship is focussed on. So, a question is framed. “Did Paul belong to ‘the Twelve’ in the sense of sharing a common apostleship with them or not?” To the answering of this question we now turn, aware and grateful that Paul himself addresses this question and answers it. His reply was that he was one with

“the Twelve”.

Paul’s repeated claim that “in nothing was he behind the very chiefest apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5 and 12:11, KJV) is most probably to be understood as a sarcastic reference to those who were presenting themselves to the church as apostles and troubling it. A similar situation is referred to at Ephesus in Revelation 2:2. However, the older interpretation of the statement which referred it to Peter, James and John, the inner circle of “the Twelve” is perhaps not wholly out of place. If that interpretation were to be admitted, it would, of course, settle the matter under consideration with clarity and finality. But such a use will not be made of that text.

Paul’s own substantiation of his link with “the Twelve” is presented in those letters where his status as an apostle of Jesus Christ needed to be introduced or even asserted because it was in some way being challenged or even denied, that is Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians. It is in the light of what he has to say in these epistles about his apostleship that expressions like “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1), or the other variants of this theme (1 Tim. 1:1; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Titus 1:1) are to be understood. In what sense Paul was an apostle he makes particularly clear in 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians.

The obvious problem which Paul’s apostleship raises is connected with time and its passing nature. In choosing a replacement for Judas Iscariot, in accordance with Holy Scripture, Peter said, “It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us — beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us — one of these should become a witness with us of his resurrection.” (Acts 1:21,22, NASB)

Now those terms could neither have described Saul of Tarsus nor even, and this is more important, Paul, the believer in Jesus Christ. He could never (or so it surely seemed) qualify for apostleship under those terms. And this not only because he was an unbeliever, which was the least of it, even though he was **such** an unbeliever, but, and this was the insuperable obstacle, because an era of revelation had passed by irrevocably. Jesus Christ would not only not be baptised again and minister on earth, but He had been raised from the dead and gone to heaven, having appeared to “the Twelve” over a period of forty days. Those elements so necessary to apostleship surely could never recur. Only from those present in the Upper Room, before the day of Pentecost came, could an apostle of Jesus Christ arise. Therefore, by lots, for the choice of an apostle was directly the Lord’s and this needed to be preserved as much as possible, Matthias “was numbered with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).

Paul was acutely aware of this theological situation for he knew the dif-

ference that Pentecost had made (Galatians 4:1-7). Yet he never saw this as constituting a problem which stood in the way of his being an apostle of Jesus Christ like “the Twelve”. He saw it as part of the amazing, incredible wonder that Christ Jesus had made him an apostle. Everything was against it: his previous life, his devastation of the church, his blasphemy, his unbelief and the passing of time, but Christ made all of these as nothing (1 Cor. 15:9,10; Galatians 1:13-16; Ephesians 3:8; 1 Timothy 1:13-15). It was Paul’s boast and claim — all glory to the grace of God in Christ Jesus — that his apostleship, when viewed in relation to that of “the Twelve” only differed from theirs in that he was “as one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8). His was an apostleship which fully harmonized with the norm, but it was given in an abnormal, theological-chronological situation. What “the Twelve” were given before and on the day of Pentecost, Paul was given after.

In Paul’s presentation of his apostolic credentials in 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, or the magnification of his office (Romans 11:13), he concentrates on the very two matters which distinguished “the Twelve” as they are described in Acts 1:23,24 and 10:39-42. These were that apostles of Jesus Christ had to be able to be witnesses of His resurrection and had to be recipients of revelation from Him. Paul was convinced that he passed on both counts with flying colours, and it is what he had to say on both these matters which supplies the basis for associating him with “the Twelve”. Let us consider what he had to say on each count.

The Apostle of Jesus Christ — A Directly-Commissioned Witness of His Resurrection from the Dead

The apostle of Jesus Christ is one who not only proclaims that Christ rose again, but one who declares that he has seen Jesus Christ who had died and had been buried, physically alive. On this point, could anything be clearer than Paul’s challenge, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). In the list of resurrection appearances which he records in 1 Cor. 15, he includes himself, saying, “And last of all, He was seen of me also” (verse 8).

It is important to realise and stress that what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus was not in the nature of a vision, that is, something which is made present only to the inward sight and having no objective reality in time and space. Though Acts 26:19 speaks of a vision, it refers to the kind of sight which results from an “appearing” (Acts 26:16), that is an event of actual self-disclosure. It was, therefore, an incident of the same kind as those recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7) (the same verb is used) when the resurrected Lord made Himself visible and tangible. He was as physically present on the road to Damascus as He had been on the road to Emmaus. Paul was physically blinded by the One whom he physically saw — the Lord Jesus Christ, raised from the dead physically.

As a result, Paul could preach that Christ had been raised from the dead as emphatically as Peter could and in the same sense (Acts 25:19).

The apostle of Jesus Christ, however, was more than a witness of the resurrected Christ. He received a commission directly from Him. Others saw Him alive again without being sent by Him as His representatives to the world and to His future church, for example, Mary Magdalene in John 20:17 and the five hundred referred to in 1 Corinthians 15:6. The Lord appeared to some in order to commission them as His apostles (Acts 1:2-8; 10:41,42). He did this with Paul (Acts 26:16-18). Paul was commissioned as an apostle by the resurrected Christ Himself (Galatians 1:15-17).

Now, Paul does not only lay claim to this event-experience but says that it occurred “last of all” (1 Cor. 15:8). This means that Paul was the last, and was to be the last to whom the resurrected Christ physically appeared. No other person like him, therefore, could be added to the band of the apostles of Jesus Christ. Only one was to be added “out of due time” to “the Twelve”. The reference to the twelve apostles of the Lamb in Revelation 22:14 is, therefore, a figurative one, representing completeness and is not to be taken literally.

The Apostle of Jesus Christ — A Chosen Recipient of Revelation from Him

To the eleven disciples in the Upper Room before His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ promised the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Among the several benefits which He would give to them for their work of witness-bearing (John 14:27) was the revelation of truth — truth previously declared which the disciples had not understood (John 14:16) and truth not yet disclosed because the disciples could not then receive it (John 16:12). So, as from Christ, the Spirit “would bring to remembrance” what Christ had said and “lead into all the truth: and show what was to come”. This is how apostles were able to preach the gospel in the world and found churches in the truth. They were to teach disciples from all nations “to observe all that Christ commanded them”. They were made, therefore, infallible in all their actual teaching, whether in oral or written form (2 Thess. 2:15) because they were recipients of revelation from Jesus Christ Himself, the Truth Incarnate. (The case of Peter in Galatians 2 does not contradict this claim because there we have an example of fallibility of **conduct**. It was what Peter did (Gal. 2:12) which was not in accord with the gospel and not anything he said. Paul dealt with him on the basis of the gospel which they both believed.)

How does Paul fit into this situation? He does so without any difficulty at all. He insists that just as no human being had appointed him to be an apostle (Galatians 1:1), so no human being had taught him the gospel

(Galatians 1:11 and 12a). “For I would have you know brethren that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it.” It was Paul’s claim that he received his gospel “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12b). Not only was the gospel divine, but he received it in a divine manner. This claim he supports by three arguments in Galatians 1 and 2. They are as follows:-

- (i) Before his conversion, he could not have been taught by the apostles because he was a persecutor and his conversion was without human instrumentality. While after his conversion, he had no extensive contact with the disciples (Galatians 1:13-24).
- (ii) When he did eventually confer with the leaders of the Jerusalem church, it was not to learn the truth from them and they recognised that he already had the gospel and so they had nothing to add to him (Galatians 2:1-10).
- (iii) So independent was he of the other apostles that he openly rebuked one of them, Peter, when his conduct undermined the gospel of divine grace common to them both (Galatians 2:11-21).

It was, however, not only God’s way of salvation, so to speak, which was revealed to Paul. It was by revelation from Christ through the Spirit that he learned that Gentiles were to be included with Jews in the one church of Christ, without their having to embrace Judaism as well (Ephesians 3:3-5). That was also the case with regard to problems concerning marriage. Paul’s expressions “not I but the Lord” and “I not the Lord” refer to the distinction between teaching which the Lord gave while He was on earth (1 Cor. 7:10 cf. Matt. 19:6) and teaching revealed by Him to Paul through the Spirit after His ascension (1 Cor. 7:12,25 and 40). The latter revelation relates to cases not covered by the former. Though there is a difference of opinion about it, the same can be said of Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23 and following). The prepositions used which are prefixed to the two verbs “received” and “delivered” are not only used in connection with the transmission of information from one human being to another in the New Testament. After all, did not the Lord tell him that He would appear to him in the future as well? (Acts 26:16).

So, Paul qualified for “the Twelve”, so to speak, on the same grounds as did they — he too was a directly commissioned witness to Christ in His resurrection **and** a divinely chosen recipient of revelation from Him for the nations and the church. Now, it was as a result of this that he (and this would apply to the others of “the Twelve” as well) was “a wise master builder” (1 Cor. 3:10), laying a foundation by his doctrine for the church for all time and in every place.

Under this heading of Paul's claim to be, in effect, ranked with "the Twelve", two other elements need to be mentioned. The first concerns the acceptance of that claim and his reception as an apostle by James, Peter and John, the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church. Though Titus, a Gentile convert, and Barnabas, a colleague, accompanied him (and, therefore, Barnabas was given the right hand of fellowship as well as Paul), yet Paul is distinguished from them both in Galatians chapter 2. It was recognised that Paul "had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter with the gospel to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7,9). Not only was Paul certain that theologically he belonged to "the Twelve", but Peter and John, two of "the Twelve", were so convinced as well. The second element concerns the divine confirmation given by signs and wonders that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:2; Hebrews 2:4; Galatians 2:8).

Paul, therefore, is not to be dissociated from "the Twelve". 1 Corinthians 15:5 and 8 in which it is alleged that he so differentiates himself is no more than a desire on his part to be historically and chronologically accurate — a concern which is so essential to the meaning and force of this great passage. 1 Corinthians 15:5 is a reference to the eleven disciples, the survivors of those who had come to be known as "the Twelve". Paul was not among them physically when the Lord revealed Himself physically to them (John 20:19 and Luke 24:36 and following). 1 Corinthians 15:8 is, as we have seen, a reference to the grounds on which Paul claimed to be associated with them.

It is true that Paul did also have another kind of apostleship. But this he shared with Barnabas because they were apostles of the church at Antioch (Acts 14:4 and 13:1 and following). In this, they were not commissioned directly by Christ, that is, without human instrumentality, but mediately via the church. That is the third kind of apostleship presented in the New Testament — men sent to preach the gospel, plant churches and those women who helped them (Philippians 4:3), and having planted them, to cause them to prosper. This apostleship is not characterised by directly given revelation and infallibility in communication. Epaphroditus was another example of this kind of apostleship (Philippians 2:25).

However, Paul was primarily an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Lord Himself did the choosing, the sending, the showing of Himself alive and the disclosing of His truth to him. This is what Paul was, first and foremost — or to quote him, "the last and the least" (1 Cor. 15:8,9). Paul is not a different class of apostle, distinct from "the Twelve".

The Apostleship of Ephesians 4:11

We turn now to the second point presented in favour of "apostles

today". It concerns the identity or type of apostles referred to in Ephesians 4:11. Though this is a separate matter, it becomes joined with the point already considered in the case presented by Mr. Wallis for "apostles today". He writes:-

"This third category of apostles referred to in Ephesians 4:11 are, according to Paul, the gifts of the ascended Christ (Eph. 4:7-11). They are thus to be distinguished from "the Twelve" who were appointed and commissioned by Christ in the days of His flesh. In a word, the appointment of "the Twelve" was pre-Pentecostal, that of Ephesians 4 apostles was post-Pentecostal. Paul was, of course, the outstanding apostle of the Ephesians 4 order and he loved to recount his personal meeting and commissioning by the ascended Christ."

Clearly, what has to be considered is the intimate connection between the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and His giving of these apostles to the church. We shall face up to this by once again setting ourselves a question to answer. It is this. What is meant in Ephesians 4:8-10 by the expression "He ascended"?

It has been a mistake, often repeated in the course of the church's history, to regard the expressions "He descended" and "He descended into the lower parts of the earth" **too literalistically**. Doing that has given rise to strange notions about what our Lord allegedly did between His death and resurrection. Those quoted expressions are theologically figurative for the immeasurable condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ and His humiliation. By the same token, to regard the corresponding expressions "He ascended" and "He ascended up far above all heavens" as referring exclusively or even primarily to the **event** of our Lord's ascension is to make the same sort of mistake. "He ascended" is theologically figurative for the infinite exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, corresponding to and consequent upon, His humiliation, which is represented by the expression "He descended".

Psalms 68 as a whole is in Paul's mind in this passage, that is, Ephesians 4:1-16, and from it he quotes with interpretation in verse 8. This Psalm struck two notes, namely Jehovah's victories over the foes of His people and His dwelling among them as Lord, distributing the blessings of His reign. Some commentators say that the occasion of this Psalm was the ark's return to Jerusalem. However, the theme is conquest and co-dwelling. The "ascending on high" referred to in Psalm 68:18 has the hill of the earthly Zion in view where the Lord's reigning presence and activity was symbolically presented to the people, but in reality, to those with faith. The Lord Jesus Christ's "ascent" in Ephesians 4 is His exaltation to reign among and for His people, following and because of His death.

Now, of course, it is not being suggested that our Lord's ascension does not figure in His exaltation. His exaltation would be incomplete without it, if such a possibility may even be theoretically considered. But what is being stated, not suggested, is that our Lord's exaltation did not **begin** with His ascension. The exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ began with His resurrection from the dead. "He ascended" in Ephesians 4 includes the resurrection. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:20 where he speaks of God's power being manifested in Christ "when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all".

When the resurrection is included in our thinking about Ephesians 4:8-11, the picture alters significantly about the identity of those apostles mentioned there. No longer are "the Twelve" necessarily excluded because it is not the ascended Christ that is in view, but the exalted Christ, that is, raised, reigning and to ascend, who gives them to His church. John 20:19-23 records a giving or commissioning when, after showing the **disciples** His hands and side, Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, even so send I you." He then gave them an assurance of the Holy Spirit's bestowal to equip them for the task as He had been. Luke 24:36 and following records the same truths as does Matthew 28:18-20. Acts 1:2 calls them apostles and 1:13 lists their names. Acts 2:1 records their actual empowering.

So, Ephesians 4:11 should not be regarded as of necessity teaching post-ascension apostles because of the expression "He ascended". These are post-exaltation apostles and they are "the Twelve" with Paul included. In Ephesians 4, the major perspective is that of a theological standpoint whereas in 1 Corinthians 15 it is an historical or chronological one. Paul never "recounted his personal meeting and commissioning by the **ascended** Christ". To suggest that he did is quite inaccurate. Paul referred to what happened on the road to Damascus as a meeting with the resurrected Christ. We have seen this from 1 Cor. 15:8. Galatians 1:1 is quite explicit on this matter, namely, "Paul an apostle by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead". On the road to Damascus, the fact that Jesus Christ had ascended was immaterial; what was important and shattering was that He was no longer in the grave. He had triumphed and was Lord. As raised, He reigned among and for His people in converting Saul and calling him to be an apostle.

One other point is mentioned in the case argued for "apostles today". It is based on the preposition "until" in Ephesians 4:13. In effect, it is a case built on the continuing need of churches to be brought up to "the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ". This is termed an experiential foundation in distinction from that

historical foundation laid by “the Twelve”. Such a foundation, it is argued, can only be supplied by present day apostles and these are the master builders (1 Cor. 3:10).

We have seen that the twelve and Paul constitute one group theologically on the basis of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, and that Ephesians 4:11 can refer to this group. On this showing, what sense can be made of the preposition “until”? Though these apostles are no longer on earth, their teaching remains, preserved by the head of the church who gave it to them, for churches in every age and place. The church or churches today do, therefore, have apostolic ministry — Paul, Peter, John and Matthew — and by them, Christ speaks by His Spirit to the churches.

The fault for the condition of the churches is not, therefore, to be attributed to their lack of apostles, but to the failure of and want of pastors, teachers and elders and the mutual encouraging of one another. All these are to edify, that is, build up others in the faith and in grace and the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The need for edification is not the proof for the need of apostles.

There are, therefore, no apostles today in the sense being argued for in the current charismatic scene. The twelve and Paul were Christ’s master-builders. All others seek to work according to their pattern, given by the Lord and recorded by His Spirit. However, there are other “apostles”, that is church-appointed men and women who devote themselves to the work of the gospel. These can be better described as pastors, teachers, preachers, evangelists, or missionaries.

In this category, from time to time, there have been those whose labours have been so significantly owned of God in raising churches from ruins, rubble, dust and nothing that their contemporaries or successors justly regard them as having something apostolic about them, for example, the Reformers, “the apostle of the North”, “the apostle of the Peak”, “the apostle of Pembrokeshire”. Their work has demanded the figurative use of this term because of its undisputed colossal nature. May many more of their calibre be raised up!

*Rev. Hywel R. Jones, MA
is minister of Wrexham Evangelical Church, Clwyd, and a member of
the faculty of the London Theological Seminary.*