
APOSTLES AND PROPHETS

This statement on apostles and prophets was approved as the official statement by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God on August 6, 2001

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Modern church statisticians cite the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement and report that Pentecostals and charismatics now make up the second largest Christian group in the world. Pentecostals stand in awe of what God has done and attribute such amazing expansion to their simple trust in the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, which continues to be at work in the church today.

The rapid advance of the Pentecostal revival has also been accompanied by a new openness to the gifts of the Spirit. The evangelical world increasingly has turned from cessationism, the belief gifts of the Spirit ceased at the end of the New Testament era, to an understanding that New Testament gifts of the Holy Spirit are vital for ministry today.

With the restoration of the miraculous gifts to the Church has also come the question of whether God is restoring the five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4:11: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”¹ Bible scholars differ on whether the gifts of pastor and teacher are separate in Ephesians 4 (yielding a total of five), or whether a better translation might be “. . . and some to be pastor-teachers” (yielding a total of four). Greek grammar would seem to dictate four, but the New Testament often discusses pastoral and teaching roles separately. However, the best designation for ministry is neither fivefold nor fourfold but manifold. Ephesians 4:12 gives to all saints the work of ministry, while 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 and Romans 12:6–8 provide aspects of ministry beyond the designations in Ephesians 4:11,12.

Relatively few questions are raised about the validity of contemporary evangelists, pastors, and teachers. However, there are a number of voices in the church today calling for the restoration of apostles and prophets, thinking these offices are the key to continued growth and vitality. The issue is important, and this paper is an effort to seek scriptural guidance.

The Apostolic Church

Some advocate the recognition of contemporary apostles and use the term *apostolic*. They believe church bodies that do so have moved closer to the New Testament ideal of ministry.

Historically, the adjective *apostolic* has been used to signify (1) church bodies that attempt to trace a succession of their clergy back to the original 12 apostles, as do the Catholic and Episcopal churches; (2) Oneness, or Jesus-Only, Pentecostal churches, who since the early 20th century have used the description “Apostolic Faith” (previously used by Trinitarian Pentecostals such as Charles F. Parham and William J. Seymour) to designate their distinctive doctrines; (3) churches that claim God has raised up present-day apostles in their midst (“New Apostolic” and “Fivefold” churches); or (4) churches, including most Protestant groups, that claim to be apostolic because they teach what the apostles taught; that is, New Testament doctrine. Therefore, most Christian denominations think of themselves, in one sense or another, as apostolic.

Pentecostal churches believe they are apostolic because (1) they teach what the apostles taught, and (2) they share in the power of the apostles through the baptism in and fullness of the Holy Spirit, who empowers

their lives and ministries. They believe what matters is not a contemporary apostolic office but apostolic doctrine and power.

The New Testament Apostles

The origin of the apostolic office is traced in the Gospels to Jesus. The Gospel of Mark reads, “[Jesus] appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14,15). Matthew and Luke contain similar attributions (cf. Matthew 10:2; Luke 6:13). The number 12 seems to have had significance, so the most common title for this group in the Gospels is “the Twelve” rather than “the Apostles” (cf. Matthew 26:14,20,47; Mark 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; Luke 8:1; 9:1; 18:31; John 6:67; 20:24). The designation “the Twelve” also continued in the life of the Early Church through the writings of Luke (Acts 6:2) and the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5). In addition, Jesus himself is called by the writer to the Hebrews “the apostle and high priest whom we confess,” (Hebrews 3:1).

The word *apostle* comes from the Greek *apostolos*² and may be translated by such terms as *delegate*, *envoy*, *messenger*, or *agent*.³ Since Jesus probably spoke Hebrew or Aramaic rather than Greek, it is possible the Hebrew/Aramaic *shaliach* also means much the same as *apostolos*. This is the actual word used by Jesus and His earliest followers and provides much of the conceptual background. The rabbis of Jesus’ day regarded it as an important legal principle: “A man’s agent (*shaliach*) is like unto himself.”⁴ This meant if a man’s agent made a deal, it was the same as the man himself making the deal. The modern concept of power of attorney is very similar.

When it comes to apostles or other kinds of agents, it is of crucial importance whom the agent represents. The Gospels make it clear the apostles were appointed by Jesus to act on His behalf. Mark’s tersely stated record of their initial commission is “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14,15). It has to do with personal fellowship with Jesus, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God on Jesus’ behalf, and participation in the power of Jesus to cast out demons. Jesus apparently sent them out early in the Galilean ministry with instructions to preach and heal the sick (cf. Matthew 10:5–14; Mark 6:7–11; Luke 9:1–5). Like the Seventy dispatched later, their immediate scope of ministry was to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 10:6).

The Apostles and Pentecost

The commission of the Twelve was dramatically expanded following the death and resurrection of Jesus. In John’s Gospel, Jesus anticipated that those who had faith in Him would do “greater things” than He had done by asking in His name (John 14:12–14). The Counselor, identified as the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of truth, who was “with” them during the time of His earthly ministry, would soon be “in” them (14:16,17). The Spirit would also teach them all things and remind them of everything He had said to them (14:26). John noted that Jesus appeared to the “disciples” after His resurrection and said, “‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (John 20:21–23). Luke makes it clear Jesus “opened” the minds of “the Eleven and those with them” (24:33) to “understand the Scriptures” to the end that “the Christ [would] suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins [would] be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45–47). Jesus then reminded the disciples they were “to stay in the city [i.e., Jerusalem] until [they had] been clothed with power from on high” (24:49).

This promise was so important that Luke recorded it again in Acts 1:4 with an explanatory word from Jesus: “For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:5). The reason for the promise is couched in Jesus’ words, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The promise was fulfilled in the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:4) and identified in Peter’s prophetic message as the “last days” gift of God’s Spirit enabling all his “sons,” “daughters,” and “servants, both men and women” to “prophesy” (Acts 2:14–17).

Although earlier trained, called, and commissioned by the Lord Jesus, the apostles needed the baptism in the Holy Spirit as the final preparation for their mission. They were granted spiritual giftings and empowerment required for the apostolic office. Previously anxious and insecure, they were transformed and energized by the Holy Spirit.⁵

The apostles began to speak as those who were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:8) and were instrumental in others receiving the gift of the Spirit (8:14–17; 10:44–46; 19:6). When Paul was converted and called to apostolic ministry, he also received the gift of the Spirit and was similarly transformed (9:17). Barnabas was said to be “full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24). The Holy Spirit guided the mission activities of the apostles, sovereignly selecting Paul and Barnabas (13:2) and sending them on their way (13:4). Later the Spirit prevented Paul and his companions from entering the province of Asia and Bythnia but directed them toward Troas and Macedonia (16:6–10). Paul was the recipient of prophetic guidance by Spirit-directed prophets as to his fate upon his return to Jerusalem (20:22,23). Whatever the natural ability of these early apostles, the genius of their ministry is found in the power and wisdom of the Spirit given to them.

The Place of the Twelve

The opening chapter of Acts reflects a concern to maintain the number of the Twelve. Peter and the other members of the original Twelve, with the 120, looked to the Scriptures and determined that the vacancy created by the defection and death of Judas should be filled. It was important that the full complement of 12 be maintained for the effusion of the Spirit. Luke had previously recorded the promise of Jesus to the Twelve: “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29,30). The importance of maintaining 12 apostles as a symbol of the 12 tribes of Israel is unmistakable. The apostolate was to be intact for the coming of the Spirit and the launching of a fully equipped church on its worldwide mission.

The way the vacancy was filled is highly instructive. Jesus had personally appeared and given “instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:2). Two qualifying issues stand out: (1) personal commissioning by the Lord, and (2) thorough familiarity with the teachings of Jesus. Careful attention was given to both in Peter’s proposal. Any candidate had to have been with them for Jesus’ entire ministry, “beginning from John’s baptism” (Acts 1:22). Two qualified candidates, “Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias,” were presented and prayer was offered. “Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).⁶ After Pentecost, however, there was no effort to replace any of the original 12 apostles nor to perpetuate the number 12 (cf. Acts 12:2).

The Special Case of the Apostle Paul

Paul’s status as an apostle is unique. He was neither a member of the Twelve nor present for Christ’s post-Resurrection appearances; his calling as an apostle came in a later and separate vision of the risen Lord. Recorded three times in Acts (9:1–19; 22:4–16; 26:9–18) and often intimated in his letters (Galatians 1:12), the account of Paul’s conversion demonstrates the authenticity and power of his call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Like the Twelve, he recognized the apostolic office was conferred in the personal call of Christ through post-Resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:5–7). Paul acknowledged he was “as . . . one abnormally born [*ektroma*]⁷” (1 Corinthians 15:8). The word is usually used for miscarriages. But rather than Paul saying he was “born” unnaturally early, he is saying that as a witness to the Resurrection and as an apostle he was “born” unnaturally late. His apostolic calling was thus without parallel and made his credentials vulnerable to attack from enemies who sought to discredit him (1 Corinthians 9:1,2; 2 Corinthians 12:11,12).

Despite the unusual nature of his encounter with Christ, Paul did not consider his apostolic status to be less than that of the other apostles. They had seen the resurrected Lord; so had he. He regularly appealed to his having seen “Jesus our Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:1). While he referred to himself as “the least of the apostles,” apparently because of his earlier persecution of the Church, he “worked harder than all of them”

(1 Corinthians 15:9,10). Though insisting on a continuity of the message (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3), he nonetheless distinguished his apostolic authority from the other apostles, even to the point of a public rebuke to Peter (Galatians 1:11–2:21). To his critics at Corinth he pointed out, “I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super-apostles’”⁸ (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11) and rehearsed his Jewish heritage (11:22), hardships (11:23–33), and his “surpassingly great revelations” (12:1–7). He reminded the Corinthians, “[T]he things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance” (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Apostles of Christ

Paul’s sense of his own calling is reflected in the introduction to most of his letters: “Paul . . . an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:1; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1, et al.). The letters of Peter begin similarly: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1; cf. 2 Peter 1:1). Paul used this designation in the text of 1 Thessalonians: “As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you . . .” (2:6). Jude 17 refers to what “the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold.” These references make it appear that the title “apostle of Christ (Jesus Christ/Lord Jesus Christ/Christ Jesus)” was standard nomenclature for all the apostles Christ had personally appeared to and appointed. It is almost always this group to whom the title “apostle” is applied in the New Testament.

Apostles of the Churches

Scholars occasionally point out a distinction between the “Apostles of Christ” and the “Apostles of the Churches.”⁹ Paul spoke of unnamed “brothers” who are “representatives [*apostoloi*] of the churches and an honor to Christ” (2 Corinthians 8:23). He also wrote to the Philippians about “Epaphroditus . . . who is also your messenger [*apostolon*], whom you sent to take care of my needs” (2:25). These references provide ample evidence the early churches did use the word *apostle* from time to time for other than those who had witnessed the Resurrection. However, the term is used in these cases in its generic sense of dispatching representatives on an official mission on behalf of the senders. For that reason, English translations of the Bible normally render the word *apostolos* in the two instances above as “messenger” or “representative.”¹⁰

False Apostles

Not all persons in the New Testament era who called themselves apostles or were accorded that status by star-struck followers were, in fact, apostles. Just as the Old Testament had its false prophets, so the New Testament had its false apostles. Much of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians reflects this very issue. Teachers, possibly itinerant Hellenistic Jews from the church at Jerusalem, had come to Corinth apparently with letters of commendation. They seem to have boasted of equality with, or even superiority to, Paul in an effort to wrest the leadership of the church away from him. Thus his references to such issues as “letters of recommendation” (2 Corinthians 3:1), his appearance and speech (10:10), “the one who commends himself” (10:18), his Jewish heritage (11:22), his extensive suffering on behalf of the church (11:23–33), and his visions and revelations (12:7)—all seem to have been an effort to deal with the threat.

Paul identified such people as “false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13). Jesus himself commended the church in Ephesus because they “tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false” (Revelation 2:2). These references and others make it clear that many who either claimed for themselves the title of “apostle” or had the title wrongly conferred upon them by others were circulating among the early Christian churches. Discernment was necessary. Paul called for careful evaluation of spiritual phenomena: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).

Apostolic Succession

A crucial issue is whether the apostolic office is to be passed on as an institutionalized office of the church. It is clear from both Acts and the letters of the New Testament that certain offices were instituted and maintained. For example, the apostles led the church in the selection of seven men, often called “deacons”

though that noun is not in the text, to administer the charitable ministries of the church (Acts 6:3). Early in the Acts record the Church, probably operating with familiar Jewish models, is observed to have elders who are functioning in leadership roles along with the apostles (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 16:4). As Paul and Silas established missionary churches, they were careful to appoint “elders” (*presbyteros*) for the leadership of those churches (Acts 14:23). Paul also summoned “elders” (*presbyteros*) of the church at Ephesus and then addressed them as “overseers” (*episkopos*) who were also to be “shepherds” (*poimaino*), or “pastors,” of the church of God (Acts 20:17,28).

The letter to the church at Philippi indicates the presence of “overseers” (*episkopos*) and “deacons” (*diakonos*) among them. The pastoral letters, usually assumed to have been written somewhat later, reveal great concern for the appointment of carefully qualified elders/overseers and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1–12; Titus 1:3–9). As can be seen, the names for the office are somewhat flexible and interchangeable. Nevertheless, it is certainly accurate to say the New Testament provides—by such names, qualifications, and selection—for the careful appointment and continuation in office of such leaders as overseers, elders, and deacons.

It is also clear that while the apostles (with the elders) were established leaders in the Early Church, there was no provision for their replacement or continuation. To be sure, with the defection of Judas from his apostolic office, the Eleven sought divine guidance to fill the gap. Other apostles also emerged, including Paul who in his first letter to the Corinthians gave insight into their selection. After Christ’s resurrection He appeared to the Twelve and later appeared to more than “five hundred of the brothers at the same time. . . . Then he appeared to James, then to *all the apostles*, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:6–8, emphasis added). Thus Paul seems to limit the office of apostle to those who had actually seen the risen Lord in the 40 days after His resurrection and to himself as having seen Him in a dramatic vision on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9). There is some uncertainty about the exact number and identity of the apostles. However, besides the Twelve, the New Testament text appears to clearly designate such persons as Paul, James the brother of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junias (probably a woman) who were “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7).

It is instructive, however, that nowhere in the New Testament after the replacement of Judas is any attention given to a so-called apostolic succession. No attempt was made to replace James son of Zebedee (John’s brother), executed by Herod (Acts 12:2). Other than the original appointments by Christ himself, there is nothing concerning the appointment of apostles. And apart from the criteria set for the selection of Matthias (Acts 1:21–26) and the criteria implied in the actions of Jesus and the account of Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3–11), there are no directions for making such an appointment. By contrast, there are clear qualifications and instructions for the appointment of elders/overseers and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9). It seems strange that apostles of Jesus Christ, concerned about faithful preservation of their message (cf. 2 Timothy 2:2), would provide for the appointment of overseers/elders while ignoring their own succession if such were indeed to be maintained.

In fact, there are certain exegetical hints the apostles of Jesus Christ are not to have successors. In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul listed all the Resurrection and post-Resurrection appearances of Christ and noted “last of all he appeared to me.” While some disagree, the statement is most commonly understood to mean Paul looked upon himself as the last apostle to whom Christ appeared.¹¹ If this is the correct understanding, only the Twelve whom Jesus personally called and those He commissioned in His post-Resurrection appearances made up His original apostles. Apostles are named first among the offices of the church (1 Corinthians 12:28) and the ministry gifts of Ephesians 4:11 because they are foundational, not necessarily because they are continuous leaders in the church. The Ephesians 4:11 passage must be interpreted in the context of the Ephesians letter itself, wherein Paul had already described the church as “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20), and the form of leadership instituted by Paul in the Ephesian church itself and the other churches he founded (Acts 14:23). Writing to Timothy at Ephesus, Paul entrusts the oversight of the church to “*elders*” (synonymous with *bishop* or *pastor* or *overseer*) and deacons, not apostles and prophets. When he bids an emotional farewell to the leaders of the Ephesian church, which he himself had established, his meeting is

with the elders (not apostles or prophets), to whom he entrusts the responsibility of bishop (or overseer) and pastor (or shepherd) (Acts 20:28).

It is difficult to escape the conclusion of Dietrich Müller: “One thing is certain. The N[ew] T[estament] never betrays any understanding of the apostolate as an institutionalized church office, capable of being passed on.”¹²

The Authority of the Apostles

The authority of the apostles was modeled by the chief Apostle, the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught them that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,” (Mark 10:45). Jesus, on occasion, acted sharply and decisively against certain sins, such as the desecration of His Father’s house (Mark 11:15–17; John 2:13–16) and the exploitative hypocrisy of the teachers of the Law and Pharisees (Matthew 23). However, He carefully avoided the trappings of political and institutional power and modeled extraordinary humility and patience for His apostles. His divine attributes were cloaked in human flesh and He was the exposition and example of His Father’s word and work.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament demonstrates the apostles of Christ possessed authority. The Early Church was formed around their teaching, which was in turn confirmed by the “wonders and miraculous signs” they did (Acts 2:42,43). They were the recognized spokesmen before the rulers (Acts 4:8ff.), and their authority was demonstrated in such events as the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). In writing to the Corinthians, a church he founded, Paul threatened to come to them “with a whip” (1 Corinthians 4:21) and did not hesitate to give stern directions for discipline in a case of incest (1 Corinthians 5:1–5). Writing to the church in Rome, which he did not found, he stated his apostolic credentials (Romans 1:1), assumed the prerogative of imparting to them spiritual gifts (1:11), and planned to “come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ” (15:29). He laid out for their belief and practice the most systematic exposition of doctrinal and ethical truth in all of Scripture. He did not hesitate to give directions for their local ethical dilemmas such as relations between the weak and the strong (chapters 14,15). Peter also, claiming apostolic standing, wrote authoritatively to apparently Gentile churches that he did not pioneer (1 Peter 1:1).

Some modern interpreters insist apostolic authority was merely local, not universal, and exercised only in churches the apostles founded.¹³ To be sure, apostles seem to have been aware of certain protocol in churches they did not pioneer (Romans 15:20; 1 Corinthians 3:10). However, they did cross geographical boundaries. The pattern of evidence throughout the New Testament indicates their authority was universal in doctrinal and ethical matters, binding in some sense upon all the churches. However, that authority must not be construed in political or bureaucratic terms. There is little evidence of their involvement in local administrative matters.

When they worked together, one of the apostles usually took the lead, as in Peter’s early activity in Jerusalem and Paul’s direction of his missionary teams. However, in dealing with the practical and doctrinal problems of the churches, the apostles often exercised a shared leadership among themselves and with the elders, a group that appears to have been added quickly to the leadership rolls. For example, the Twelve called upon the church of Jerusalem to select the Seven (Acts 6). When the Jerusalem Council resolved the schismatic debate over whether the Gentiles should keep the Jewish law, the issue was decided by “the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:4,6,22). On this or some similar issue, even the two apostles Paul and Peter initially came to conflicting opinions (Galatians 2:11–14). James Dunn aptly observes, “Apostolic authority is exercised not over the Christian community, but within it; and the authority is exercised . . . ‘to equip the saints for the work of their ministry, for the building up of Christ’s body’” (Ephesians 4:12).¹⁴

Since apostles were frequently mobile, local rule in the maturing churches seems to have been exercised largely by elders. In the Jerusalem church, the apostles were the sole authority figures early on (Acts 2:42; 4:37); but perhaps because of persecution and travel, they appear to have been less prominent over time. Peter reported the conversion of Cornelius and his household to the “apostles and the brothers” (11:1). The “apostles and elders” made up the Jerusalem council (15:6). When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey, he called on “James, and all the elders” (21:18). Elders were certainly key authority figures in

Jerusalem, as seen in Acts, and elsewhere as seen in New Testament letters. The absence of apostles on Paul's last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18) is further evidence that as the Twelve dispersed, the Jerusalem church did not provide for further apostolic replacement as they had at the defection of Judas (Acts 1:12–26).

None of the New Testament letters are addressed to an apostle, as would be expected if each city had its own ruling apostle. One of the few letters that includes church officers in the title, Philippians, is addressed to “overseers [*episkopos*] and deacons [*diakonos*]” (1:1)—not to a local or city apostle. There seems to be no concern to place recognized apostles in residence in the various churches or regions.

The Marks of an Apostle

Striving to protect the Corinthians from the seduction of “false apostles,” Paul pointed out characteristics (*semeion*, “sign,” 2 Corinthians 12:12) that identified a genuine apostle. From that context and the larger New Testament background, the following are apparent:

1. The first and most important mark of true apostles of Christ was that they had seen the risen Lord and been personally commissioned by Him as witnesses to His resurrection (Acts 1:21,22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7,8). They were thus appropriately called “apostles of Christ.”
2. The personal call and commission of the risen Christ had to be consummated in the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4 [for Paul, see Acts 9:1–17]), at which time the spiritual gift, or *charisma*, of apostleship was granted. This understanding is reflected, for example, in Paul's statements: “It was he who gave some to be apostles . . .” (Ephesians 4:11) and “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power” (Ephesians 3:7). The Spirit with His power and anointing set apostles first among the leaders of the church (1 Corinthians 12:28).
3. Apostles were supernaturally equipped for prophetic preaching and teaching. To illustrate, when the Spirit fell at Pentecost, the disciples spoke “in other tongues as the Spirit enabled [*apophthengomai*] them” (Acts 2:4). Confronted with the confused and contradictory opinions of the watching crowd, Peter “stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed” (*apophthengomai*) them (2:14) in a masterful explanation resulting in 3,000 conversions. The Greek verb *apophthengomai* is used to denote prophetic inspiration, which in this context is the immediate result of the Spirit's enablement.¹⁵ Paul reflected much of the same awareness: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power” (1 Corinthians 2:4).
4. With the apostolic gift came miraculous spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8–10). “The things that mark [*semeia*, “signs”] an apostle¹⁶—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance” (2 Corinthians 12:12). The Book of Acts attributes numerous miracles to Peter, Paul, and the other apostles (Acts 5:12; 9:32–43; 13:6–12; 14:3; 16:16–18; 19:11; 28:7–9). Paul evidently regarded such miraculous ministry as an essential mark of a true apostle. He also taught and preached among them “with a demonstration of the Spirit's power” so their “faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power” (1 Corinthians 2:4,5).
5. The apostles were the authoritative teachers of the Early Church in both belief and practice. They were charged above all with the accuracy and purity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4; cf. Acts 2:42; Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:8; Titus 1:9). The intent of their preaching and teaching is expressed in Ephesians 4:12,13: “so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . and become mature.” The apostolic doctrine became the content of the New Testament canon. The apostles were understood either to have written the canonical books or to have been the primary sources and guarantors of their inspired character.

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6. Apostles were commissioned as missionaries and church builders. Those the New Testament speaks about did this successfully. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20) was given specifically to the Eleven, perhaps in the company of the “more than five hundred” (1 Corinthians 15:6). The missionary impulse breathes through the accounts of apostolic commissioning (cf. Luke 24:47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8; 9:15; 22:15; 26:17,18; Galatians 1:15–17; et al.).
 7. Suffering for Christ’s sake seems to have been a major mark of the apostolic office. Paul validated his ministry and armed the Corinthian church against the seduction of false apostles with a lengthy personal history of sufferings on behalf of the gospel. “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body which is the church” (Colossians 1:24).
 8. Apostles were pastoral and relational. Paul’s love for his parishioners and his ministry associates flows through his letters. The warm and extended greetings at the conclusion of Romans are striking (16:1–16). He repeatedly uses parenting language (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 12:14,15). On behalf of the Corinthians, he is “jealous . . . with a godly jealousy” (2 Corinthians 11:2). To the Thessalonians, Paul wrote that he loved and cared for them gently as “a mother caring for her little children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). The language in the letters of Peter (1 Peter 4:12; 2 Peter 3:1, NRSV) and John (1 John 2:7, NRSV, et al.) emphasizes the same pastoral instincts.

The New Testament Prophets

“Prophets” are found immediately after “apostles” in one list of ministry gifts (Ephesians 4:11), and their activity is closely linked to that of apostles throughout the New Testament. Paul had a high view of their role: “And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets . . .” (1 Corinthians 12:28). Further, the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). Along with the apostles, prophets were complementary gifts to the foundational era of the church.

The historical accounts in the New Testament affirm these complementary roles. New Testament prophets first appeared by name in Acts when a group, apparently residing in Jerusalem, went to Antioch and one of their number, Agabus, accurately predicted the coming great famine (Acts 11:27–30). Antioch soon had its own group of resident prophets—Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul (Paul) (Acts 13:1). Two other Jerusalem leaders and prophets were chosen to bear the council letter to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, and along the way “said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers” (Acts 15:22,32). On Paul’s return to Jerusalem after the third missionary journey, he stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, who “had four unmarried daughters who prophesied,” and we learn women were active and recognized as prophets. At that time Agabus made his way down from Jerusalem to Caesarea and prophesied that the Jews of Jerusalem would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10,11).

Paul’s letters, written earlier than the Book of Acts, indicate the presence of prophets in the churches he had established as well as those he did not (e.g., the church at Rome). For example, he provided instruction on their activities in Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:29–32), saying their prophecies were to be tested by apostolic doctrine (1 Corinthians 14:37). Women prophets were active in the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5,6). The Romans were to exercise the gift of prophecy “in proportion” to their faith (Romans 12:6). The Thessalonians were cautioned not to “treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thessalonians 5:20). The Ephesians letter stated Paul’s understanding that, with the apostles, the prophets were foundational to the church (Ephesians 2:20). In that capacity they were, with the apostles, recipients of divinely given revelation (Ephesians 3:5) and a ministry gift to the church (Ephesians 4:11). To Timothy, Paul noted a prophetic message had accompanied the laying on of hands by the elders (1 Timothy 4:14).

The Book of Revelation is apparently to be understood as a prophecy, thus according John prophetic status (Revelation 1:3). Revelation also says the church was to be on guard against false prophets, in this case “Jezebel,” who by their teaching and conduct perverted the apostolic gospel (Revelation 2:20).

These accounts make clear that (1) there were recognized groups of prophets in the early churches often closely associated with the apostles; (2) the apostles themselves (as Barnabas, Silas [both of whom on occasion appear to be recognized as apostles], Saul [Paul], and John) also functioned as prophets (Acts 13:1; 15:32; Revelation 1:3); (3) these prophets did travel on occasion from church to church; (4) both men and women were recognized as prophets; (5) prophets, while never appointed to ruling functions in their capacity as prophets like overseers/elders did exercise spiritual influence with the apostles and elders in the belief and practice of the Early Church; (6) the integrity of the prophet was maintained by authentic inspired utterance that was true to the Scriptures and apostolic doctrine; and (7) there is no provision for qualifying or appointing prophets as a part of a church leadership hierarchy for succeeding generations.

The Gift of Prophecy

While there were recognized prophets in the New Testament era, even more pervasive was the gift of prophecy that energized the apostolic church. The Old Testament prophet Joel, moved by God, prophesied, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28,29). Significantly, Peter, when explaining the Pentecost event and its evidential tongues, identified them with Joel’s prediction of the outpouring of the Spirit and twice repeated that both sons and daughters, men and women, would prophesy (Acts 2:17,18). Peter’s sermon was clearly a prophecy immediately inspired by the Spirit, as the verb “addressed [*apophthengomai*]” (Acts 2:14), which means “to speak as a prophet,”¹⁷ denotes. When one examines closely the witness to Christ given by the early Christian leaders in Acts, the prophetic impulse is apparent—and doubtlessly intended by Luke. Peter’s words to the crippled beggar (Acts 3:6), the temple crowds (Acts 3:12ff.), the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), to list a few, are filled with prophetic import. Stephen’s eloquence and power are prophetic (Acts 7). The impact of the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:4–8) and other unnamed believers (Acts 11:19–21) was likewise Spirit-enabled. And so it is throughout the Acts account.

While it is too much to say every utterance of a believer is a prophecy, nonetheless, the theme of Acts is that every believer receives the power of the Holy Spirit to be a prophetic witness to the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). Interestingly, John noted, “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). All believers are inducted into a universal “prophethood”¹⁸ and are endowed with one or more spiritual gifts, many of which have directly to do with wise, instructive, and edifying utterances (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:8–10; Ephesians 4:7–13; 1 Peter 4:10).

Paul makes it clear not every believer will be a prophet in terms of filling a recognized “office,” or, perhaps, even being regularly used by the Spirit in that way (1 Corinthians 12:28,29). The very identification of a separate gift of prophecy implies that. However, at the same time, he encourages all believers to “desire . . . especially the gift of prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1), for the person who prophesies does so for the “strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Corinthians 14:3) of others. There is no statute of limitations on the Spirit of prophecy. In the words of Peter’s prophetic sermon, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to study the roles of apostles and prophets within the Ephesians 4:11,12 ministry context and present findings both consistent with Scripture and relevant for this strategic time in the growth of the Pentecostal movement. The intent is not to be argumentative or polemical but to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). With these considerations in mind, the following conclusions are offered:

1. The apostolic nature of the church is to be found in adherence to the Word of God, which has been faithfully transmitted by the apostles of Jesus Christ in their foundational role, and in vital

participation in the life and ministry of the Holy Spirit, who baptized, gifted, and led the first apostles.

2. Since the New Testament does not provide guidance for the appointment of future apostles, such contemporary offices are not essential to the health and growth of the church, nor its apostolic nature.
3. While we do not understand it to be necessary, some church bodies may in good faith and careful biblical definition choose to name certain leaders apostles. The word “apostle” (apostolos) is used in different ways in the New Testament: (1) for the Twelve disciples originally appointed by Jesus (and later Matthias); (2) for the Twelve plus Paul and a larger group (1 Corinthians 15:3–8) whose exact numbers are somewhat uncertain; and (3) for others such as Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25) and the unnamed “brothers” Paul wrote about (2 Corinthians 8:23). Groups one and two, personally called and commissioned by the risen Lord, are often referred to in Scripture as “apostles of Jesus Christ” and are foundational apostles (Ephesians 2:20) with unique revelatory and authoritative roles in establishing the church and producing the New Testament. The third group, the “apostles of the churches,” were assigned specific roles and responsibilities as needed by the early churches.

Contemporary apostles, of course, will not have seen or been commissioned by the risen Lord in the manner of the “apostles of Jesus Christ,” nor will they be adding their teachings to the canon of Scripture. Presumably they will demonstrate the other marks of an apostle taught in the New Testament.

4. The title of apostle should not be lightly granted or assumed. Historically, apostles have been persons of recognized spiritual stature, stalwart character, and great effectiveness in the work of the church. Paul’s warnings about “those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about,” his assertion that “such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ,” and his further association of them with “Satan [who] himself masquerades as an angel of light,” (2 Corinthians 11:12–14) are sobering—reminders that unfettered human pride in seeking church leadership can blind one to the machinations of the devil. Persons lacking character may attach the title of apostle to themselves in order to assert dominance and control over other believers, while leaving themselves unaccountable to the members in their care or the spiritual eldership of their own fellowship.
5. The function of apostle occurs whenever the church of Jesus Christ is being established among the unevangelized. As Pentecostals, we fervently desire a generation of men and women who will function apostolically: to take the gospel with signs following to people at home and abroad who have not yet heard or understood that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
6. Prophecy is an ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit that will always be broadly distributed throughout a holy and responsive church until Jesus comes. The Spirit sovereignly chooses and directs persons who are open and sensitive to His gifts and promptings and endows them variously with an array of verbal gifts. Paul admonished, “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1). Many persons of both sexes may be expected to exercise the gift of prophecy in various ways, as seen in the New Testament.

The New Testament does not make provisions for establishing the prophet in a hierarchical governing structure of the church; in fact, the content of prophecy itself should always be tested by and responsible to the superior authority of Scripture. However, the church should long for authentic prophecy with a message, which is relevant to contemporary needs and subject to the authority of Scripture.

Finally, the Ephesians 4:11,12 gifts are both the historical and contemporary heritage of the Church. Some apostolic and prophetic functions flowing from persons directly commissioned by the risen Lord and acting in revelatory capacities seem clearly to belong to the foundational era of the Church. At the same time,

some of those functions having to do with the revitalization, expansion, and nurture of the church ought to be present in every generation. We encourage all believers, led and filled by the Spirit, to allow themselves to be fully utilized as servants of the Lord, since all gifts are needed to edify and complete the body as well as to mobilize the body to reach the world. Then the purpose of all ministry gifts will be realized: “To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12,13).

Practical Questions Regarding Apostles And Prophets

1. Does the Assemblies of God recognize present-day apostles and prophets?

The Assemblies of God recognizes ministers as certified, licensed, or ordained. The work of district councils and the General Council is overseen by presbyters and superintendents. Local churches appoint deacons. The Assemblies of God believes this practice is consistent with apostolic practice provided in the pastoral letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. The pastoral letters do not make provision for the appointment of apostles or prophets, nor does the Book of Acts indicate that provision for such was given in the churches established on the missionary journeys. The apostles appointed not apostles or prophets but elders (Acts 14:23). At the conclusion of the missionary journeys, Paul met with the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17–38). Clearly, elders are also given the functions of bishop (“overseer”) and shepherd (“pastor”) (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

Thus, within the Assemblies of God, persons are not recognized by the title of apostle or prophet. However, many within the church exercise the ministry function of apostles and prophets. Apostolic functions usually occur within the context of breaking new ground in unevangelized areas or among unreached people. The planting of over 225,000 churches worldwide since 1914 in the Assemblies of God could not have been accomplished unless apostolic functions had been present. In the Early Church, false apostles did not pioneer ministries; they preyed on ministries established by others. Prophetic functions occur when believers speak under the anointing of the Spirit to strengthen, encourage, or comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3). All prophecies are to be weighed carefully (1 Corinthians 14:29). A predictive prophecy may be true, but the prophet whose doctrine departs from biblical truth is false. A predictive prophecy that proves false leads to the conclusion that the person is a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18:19–22).

Finally, it must be noted that titles are not as important as ministry itself. Too often a title is worn in an attitude of carnal pride. The title does not make the person or the ministry. The person with ministry makes the title meaningful. Jesus explicitly warned His disciples against engaging in the quest for titles (Matthew 23:8–12). He tells us, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28).

2. What is the implication for the local church in the current emphasis on apostles and prophets?

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements have witnessed various excessive or misplaced theological emphases over the years. We look with grave concern on those who do not believe in congregational church government, who do not trust the maturity of local church bodies to govern themselves under Scripture and the Spirit. Such leaders prefer more authoritarian structures where their own word or decrees are unchallenged.

In the current emphasis on Ephesians 4:11, verse 12 is being neglected: “. . . to prepare God’s people for works of service [i.e. ministry], so that the body of Christ may be built up.” The stress of the New Testament lies with every-believer ministry. The Protestant Reformation recaptured the biblical truth of the priesthood of all believers. The Pentecostal movement has spread like a fast-moving fire through the world because of the Spirit-gifted ministry of the entire body. The church must always remember that leadership gifts are not given for the exaltation of a few but for the equipping of all God’s people for ministry.

3. *Should Assemblies of God churches welcome the ministries of apostles and prophets?*

We encourage our churches to give close heed to the following provision of the General Council Bylaws: Pastors and leaders of assemblies should make proper investigation of persons who seek to gain entrance to teach, minister, or pastor. Use of the platform should be denied until spiritual integrity and reliability have been determined. Since the use of non-Assemblies of God ministers may bring confusion and problems detrimental to the Fellowship, it is recommended that Assemblies of God churches use Assemblies of God ministers (Article VI, Section 3).

This bylaw provision is consistent with the oversight responsibility given to pastors (Acts 20:28–31) and leaders in the body of Christ (1 Timothy 5:22, 2 Timothy 4:3–5).

Notes

¹Biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

²For simplicity, when Greek nouns and verbs are included they will usually be in the nominative singular and first person singular indicative.

³A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd edition, rev. and ed., Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 122.

⁴Tractate Berakoth 5.5 and several other places in the Mishnah, the oldest portion of the Talmud. While the earliest rabbinical references date from the second century, it seems likely that the institution was much earlier. However, some scholars trace the concept to the “to send” language both of the Old Testament itself and secular Greek. See Colin Brown, gen. ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), “Apostle,” 1:126–136.

⁵See the insightful study of C.G. Kruse in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 76–82.

⁶It is frequently suggested that the Eleven erred in their selection of Matthias because Judas’ place was reserved for Paul. Matthias, it is noted, immediately passes into oblivion. However, there is no hint of criticism in the text and few of the Twelve are mentioned after chapter 1. Paul’s apostolic credentials are established independently of the Twelve by both Luke and Paul himself (cf. Acts 9:1–30, especially vv. 26–28; Gal. 1:15–24).

⁷A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 311.

⁸Some commentators identify the “super-apostles” with the Twelve; however, others suggest that the context more readily supports an identification with Jewish-Hellenistic teachers who came to Corinth with letters of introduction, perhaps from Jerusalem.

⁹See the discussion in E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 38.

¹⁰“[M]essengers without extraordinary status.” A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 122.

¹¹Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 732.

¹²Colin Brown, gen. ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:135.

¹³See, for example, James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 578–579.

¹⁴*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 574.

¹⁵*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1:44. See also Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 1:447.

¹⁶New American Standard Version and New Revised Standard Version, “signs of a true apostle.”

¹⁷*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 125.

¹⁸Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 71–84.

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