

From the Ordinary to Extraordinary

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If you've ever visited the great cathedrals in Europe, you might assume that the apostles were larger-than-life stained-glass saints with shining halos who represented an exalted degree of spirituality. The fact of the matter is that they were very, very common men.

It's a shame they have so often been put on pedestals as magnificent marble figures, or portrayed in paintings like some kind of Roman gods. That dehumanizes them. They were just twelve completely ordinary men--perfectly human in every way. We mustn't lose touch with who they really were.

I recently read a biography of William Tyndale, who pioneered the translation of Scripture into English. He thought it wrong that common people heard the Bible only in Latin and not in their own language. The church leaders of his day, incredibly, did not want the Bible in the language of the people because (like the Pharisees of Jesus' day) they feared losing their ecclesiastical power. But against their opposition, Tyndale translated the New Testament into English and had it published. For his efforts he was rewarded with exile, poverty, and persecution. Finally, in 1536, he was strangled and burned at the stake.

One of the main things that motivated Tyndale to translate Scripture into the common language was a survey of English clergy which revealed that most of them did not even know who the twelve apostles were. Only a few of them could name more than four or five of the leading apostles. Church leaders and Christians of today might fare just as poorly on the test. The way the institutional church has canonized these men has actually dehumanized them and made them seem remote and otherworldly. It is a strange irony, because when Jesus chose them, He selected them not for any extraordinary abilities or spiritual superiority. He seems to have deliberately chosen men who were notable only for their ordinariness.

What qualified these men to be apostles? Obviously it was not any intrinsic ability or outstanding talent of their own. They were Galileans. They were not the elite. Galileans were deemed low-class, rural, uneducated, people. They were commoners--nobodies. But again, they were not selected because they were any more distinguished or more talented than others in Israel at the time.

Certainly, there *are* some rather clear moral and spiritual qualifications that have to be met by men who would fill this or any other kind of leadership role in the church. In fact, the standard for spiritual leadership in the church is extremely *high*. Consider, for example, the qualifications for being an elder or a pastor, listed in 1 Timothy 3:2-7:

[He] must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Titus 1:6-9 give a similar list. Hebrews 13:7 also suggests that church leaders must be exemplary moral and spiritual examples, because their faith must be the kind others can follow, and they will be required to give an account to God for how they conduct themselves. These are very, very high standards.

By the way, the standard is no lower for the rest of the church. Leaders are examples for everyone else. There's no acceptable "lower" standard for rank-and-file church members. In fact, in Matthew 5:48, Jesus said to *all* believers, "Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Frankly, no one meets such a standard. Humanly speaking, no one "qualifies" when the standard is utter perfection. No one is fit to be in God's Kingdom, and no one is inherently worthy to be in God's service. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). There is none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). Remember, it was the mature apostle Paul who confessed, "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18). In 1 Timothy 1:15 he called himself the chief of sinners.

So there are no intrinsically qualified people. God Himself must save sinners, sanctify them, and then transform them unqualified into instruments He can use.

The twelve were like the rest of us; they were selected from the unworthy and the unqualified. They were, like Elijah, men "with a nature like ours" (James 5:17). They did not rise to the highest usefulness because they were somehow *different* from us. Their transformation into vessels of honor was solely the work of the Potter.

Many Christians become discouraged and disheartened when their spiritual life and witness suffer because of sin or failure. We tend to think we're worthless nobodies--and left to ourselves, that would

be true! But worthless nobodies are just the kind of people God uses, because that is all He has to work with.

Satan may even attempt to convince us that our shortcomings render us useless to God and to His church. But Christ's choice of the apostles testifies to the fact that God can use the unworthy and the unqualified. He can use nobodies. They turned the world upside-down, these twelve (Acts 17:6). It was not because they had extraordinary talents, unusual intellectual abilities, powerful political influence, or some special social status. They turned the world upside-down because God worked in them to do it.

God chooses the humble, the lowly, the meek, and the weak so that there's never any question about the source of power when their lives change the world. It's not the man; it's the truth of God and the power of God *in* the man. (We need to remind some preachers today of this. It's not their cleverness, or their personality. The power is in the Word--the truth that we preach--not in us.) And apart from one Person--one extraordinary human being who was God's Son incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ--the history of God's work on earth is the story of His using the unworthy and molding them for His use the same careful way a potter fashions clay. The twelve were no exception to that.

The apostles properly hold an exalted place in redemptive history, of course. They are certainly worthy of being regarded as heroes of the faith. The book of Revelation describes how their names will adorn the twelve gates of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. So heaven itself features an eternal tribute to them. But that doesn't diminish the truth that they were as ordinary as you and me. We need to remember them not from their stained-glass images, but from the down-to-earth way the Bible presents them to us. We need to lift them out of their other-worldly obscurity and get to know them as real people. We need to think of them as real men, and not as some kind of exalted figures from the pantheon of religious ritualism.

Let's not, however, underestimate the importance of their office. Upon their selection, the twelve apostles in effect became the true spiritual leaders of Israel. The religious elite of *apostate* Israel were symbolically set aside when Jesus chose them. The apostles became the first preachers of the New Covenant. They were the ones to whom the Christian gospel was first entrusted. They represented the true Israel of God--a genuinely repentant and believing Israel. They also became the foundation-stones of the church, with Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Those truths are heightened, not diminished, by the fact that these men were so ordinary.

Again, that is perfectly consistent with the way the Lord always works. In 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 we read, "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." That is the very reason there were no philosophers, no brilliant writers, no famous debaters,

no distinguished teachers, and no men who had ever distinguished themselves as great orators among the twelve Christ chose. They *became* great spiritual leaders and great preachers under the power of the Holy Spirit, but it was not because of any innate oratorical skill, leadership abilities, or academic qualifications these men had. Their influence is owing to one thing and one thing only: the power of the message they preached.

On a human level, the gospel was thought a foolish message and the apostles were deemed unsophisticated preachers. Their teaching was beneath the elite. They were mere fishermen and working-class nobodies. Peons. Rabble. That was the assessment of their contemporaries. (The same thing has been true of the genuine church of Christ throughout history. It is true in the evangelical world today. Where are the impressive intellects, the great writers, and the great orators esteemed by the world? They're not found, for the most part, in the church.) "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (v. 26).

"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (vv. 27-29). God's favorite instruments are nobodies, so that no man can boast before God. In other words, God chooses whom He chooses in order that *He* might receive the glory. He chooses weak instruments so that no one will attribute the power to human instruments rather than to God, who wields those instruments. Such a strategy is unacceptable to those whose whole pursuit in life is aimed toward the goal of human glory.

With the notable exception of Judas, these men were not like that. They certainly struggled with pride and arrogance like every fallen human being. But the driving passion of their lives became the glory of Christ. And it was that passion, subjected to the influence of the Holy Spirit--not any innate skill or human talent--that explains why they left such an indelible impact on the world.

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