What Is an Apostle?
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12
Code: BQ060413

And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? (12:28–30)

Paul again reminds the Corinthians of God's sovereign and perfect provision in equipping His church. It is unified and diversified. "One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills" (12:11). As in 12:8–10, the apostle does not here give an exhaustive list of gifts but simply illustrates them—repeating some, deleting some, and adding others—to show the variety of ways in which the Lord calls and equips His people to do His work harmoniously. He continues to stress the same three key points: sovereignty, unity, and diversity.

In verse 28 Paul first mentions certain gifted men and then certain spiritual gifts. The gifted men are **appointed**, just as members are placed, or appointed, in the church as God plans (v. 18, where the same Greek verb, *tithemi*, is used). The term basically means to set or place, but is often used, as in these two verses, to indicate official appointment to an office (cf. John 15:16; Acts 20:28, "made"; 2 Tim. 1:11). God has sovereignly appointed **first apostles, second prophets, third teachers**. The other divinely appointed offices are those of evangelist and pastor, or pastor–teacher (Eph. 4:11).

The first two offices mentioned in verse 28, those of apostle and of prophet, had three basic responsibilities: (1) to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20); (2) to receive and declare the revelation of God's Word (Acts 11:28; 21:10–11; Eph. 3:5); and (3) to give confirmation of that Word through "signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:12; cf. Acts 8:6–7; Heb. 2:3–4).

The **first** of the gifted men in the New Testament church were the apostles, of whom Jesus Christ Himself is foremost (Heb. 3:1). The basic meaning of **apostle** (*apostolos*) is simply that of one sent on a mission. In its primary and most technical sense *apostle* is used in the New Testament only of the twelve, including Matthias, who replaced Judas (Acts 1:26), and of Paul, who was uniquely set apart as apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15–17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:7–9; 2 Cor. 11:5). The qualifications for that apostleship were having been chosen directly by Christ and having witnessed the resurrected Christ (Mark 3:13; Acts 1:22–24). Paul was the last to meet those qualifications (Rom. 1:1; etc.). It is not possible therefore, as some claim, for there to be apostles in the church today. Some have

observed that the apostles were like delegates to a constitutional convention. When the convention is over, the position ceases. When the New Testament was completed, the office of apostle ceased.

The term *apostle* is used in a more general sense of other men in the early church, such as Barnabas (Acts 14:4), Silas and Timothy (1 Thess. 2:6), and a few other outstanding leaders (Rom. 16:7; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). The false apostles spoken of in 2 Cor. 11:13 no doubt counterfeited this class of apostleship, since the others were limited to thirteen and were well known. The true apostles in the second group were called “messengers (*apostoloi*) of the churches” (2 Cor. 8:23), whereas the thirteen were apostles of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; etc).

Apostles in both groups were authenticated “by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12), but neither group was self–perpetuating. In neither sense is the term *apostle* used in the book of Acts after 16:4. Nor is there any New Testament record of an apostle in either group being replaced when he died.

The text here affirms that **prophets** were also appointed by God as specially gifted men, and differ from those believers who have the gift of prophecy (12:10). Not all such believers could be called prophets. It seems that the office of prophet was exclusively for work within a local congregation, whereas that of apostleship was a much broader ministry, not confined to any area, as implied in the word *apostolos* (“one who is sent on a mission”). Paul, for example, is referred to as a prophet when he ministered locally in the Antioch church (Acts 13:1), but elsewhere is always called an apostle.

The prophets sometime spoke revelation from God (Acts 11:21–28) and sometimes simply expounded revelation already given (as implied in Acts 13:1, where they are connected with teachers). They always spoke for God but did not always give a newly revealed message from God. The prophets were **second** to the apostles, and their message was to be judged by that of the apostles (1 Cor. 14:37). Another distinction between the two offices may have been that the apostolic message was more general and doctrinal, whereas that of the prophets was more personal and practical.

Like the apostles, however, their office ceased with the completion of the New Testament, just as the Old Testament prophets disappeared when that testament was completed, some 400 years before Christ. The church was established “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph. 2:20). Once the foundation was laid, the work of the apostles and prophets was finished. The work of interpreting and proclaiming the now–written Word was taken over by evangelists, pastor–teachers, and teachers. The purpose of apostles and prophets was to equip the church with right doctrine; the purpose of evangelists, pastor–teachers, and teachers is to equip the church for effective ministry. The offices are listed here in 1 Corinthians without chronological distinctiveness or reference to duration, because at that time they were all operative.

The third office is that of **teacher**, which may be the same as that of pastor–teacher (see Eph. 4:11; Acts 13:1). I am inclined, however, to consider them as being separate. The teacher not only has the gift of teaching but God's calling to teach. He is called and gifted for the ministry of studying and interpreting the Word of God to the church. All who have the office of teaching also have the gift of teaching, but not everyone with the gift has the office.

The second half of verse 28 lists several representative spiritual gifts, both temporary and permanent. The temporary sign gifts of **miracles** and **healings** are discussed under 12:9–10. Various kinds of tongues will be discussed in following chapters. The other two are permanent serving gifts.

The gift of **helps** is a gift for service in the broadest sense of helping and supporting others in day–by–day, often unnoticed, ways. It is the same gift as that of serving (Rom. 12:7), though another Greek word is used in that text. **Helps** (*antilempsis*) is an especially beautiful word, meaning to take the burden off someone else and place it on oneself. That gift doubtlessly is one of the most widely distributed of any, and is a gift that is immeasurably important in supporting those who minister other gifts. Paul used the same term in his final words to the Ephesian elders, as he met with them at Miletus on his way to certain arrest in Jerusalem: "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must *help* the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' " (Acts 20:35).

To the Philippians Paul speaks of Epaphroditus as my "fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need, … risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me" (Phil. 2:25, 30). Whatever other gifts he may have had, Epaphroditus clearly had the gift of helps and ministered it faithfully.

The gift of helps is not glamorous or showy and, as in the Corinthian church, often is not highly prized or appreciated. But it is God's gift, and its faithful ministry is highly prized by Him and by any leader who knows the value of supporting people behind the scenes.

The gift of **administrations** is the gift of leadership. The term comes from *kubernesis*, literally meaning "to steer or pilot" a ship, and is so used in Acts 27:11. It refers to one who keeps a ship, or a church, on course toward its proper destination. In the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) the term is used several times, in each case in relation to wisdom. In Proverbs 12:5 it is translated "counsels," and in Ezekiel, wise men are compared to "pilots" (27:8).

The gift of the "word of wisdom" (1 Cor. 12:8) has to do with understanding and practically applying the truths of God's Word. The wisdom of those with the gift of administrations lies in the ability to make wise decisions and to mobilize, motivate, and direct others toward an objective. A pastor most often has the gift of administrations, a necessary ability if he is to lead the church well (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17;

Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Like the pilot of a ship, he is not owner but steward. The church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ; the one gifted with administrations is His steward. There is nothing to indicate that the gift is limited to pastors. It is found in many others to whom the Lord has given the ministry of leading in various ways.

Because it was “not lacking in any gift,” we know that the Corinthian church had gifted leaders. And because the leaders apparently were not doing their work “properly and in an orderly manner” (14:40; cf. v. 33), we also know that they were not exercising their gifts, or else the people refused to follow their leadership.

Paul’s primary point in listing the offices and gifts of 12:28 was to emphasize again the “varieties of ministries” (v. 5) God gives to His church. Mentioning the offices and most of the gifts again, he asks rhetorically about each: **all are not** that type of minister **are they?** or **all do not have** that gift **do they?** God does not intend for everyone to have the same gift, and He does not intend for everyone to have gifts that are out front and noticed. He distributes the offices and the gifts according to His sovereign purpose, “just as He wills” (12:11). The responsibility of believers is to accept the ministries they are given with gratitude and to use them with faithfulness.

It is interesting that the two gifts mentioned in verse 28 that are not mentioned in verses 29–30 are helps and administrations, probably the ones least prized by the Corinthians, but clearly the ones for which they had the greatest need.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).