

Grace to You :: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Are There Prophets Today?

Scripture: Ephesians 4

Code: BQ071012

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, (4:11)

After his parenthetical analogy (vv. 9–10) from Psalm 68:18, Paul continues his explanation of spiritual gifts. Christ not only gives gifts to individual believers but to the total Body. To each believer He gives special gifts of divine enablement, and to the church overall He gives specially gifted men as leaders (see v. 8, “He gave gifts to men”)—**as apostles ... prophets ... evangelists, and ... pastors and teachers.**

He gave emphasizes the sovereign choice and authority given to Christ because of His perfect fulfillment of the Father’s will. Not only **apostles** and **prophets** but also **evangelists ... pastors and teachers** are divinely called and placed.

Apostles and Prophets

In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul says, “God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” That statement adds weight not only to the idea of divine calling but also to the chronological significance (“first, ... second, ... third”) in the giving of these gifted men to the church.

The first two classes of gifted men, **apostles** and **prophets**, were given 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.

... Prophets were also appointed by God as specially gifted men, and differ from those believers who have the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 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 sometimes 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. (*First Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984], pp. 322–24)

There is no mention of the latter two gifted offices replacing the first two, because in New Testament times all were operative. But the fact is that, as they continued to serve the church, the **evangelists** and **pastors and teachers** did pick up the baton from the first generation **apostles** and **prophets**.

From its inception at Pentecost the church has been indebted to the **apostles**, through whom Christ established the fullness of New Testament doctrine (see Acts 2:42). Those uniquely called and empowered men recorded God's final revelation as He revealed it to them.

The **prophets**, though they did not usually receive direct revelation from God, nevertheless were greatly instrumental in building up and strengthening the early church. Both **apostles** and **prophets** have passed from the scene (Eph. 2:20), but the foundation they laid is that on which all of Christ's church has been built.

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