

Marks of a True Apostle: Foundation of the Church

Scripture: Ephesians 2:19–20

Code: B131218

The New Apostolic Reformation—led by Peter Wagner and other modern apostles—contends that we're living in the second apostolic age of the church, in which they exert the same authority over the church as the New Testament apostles. But as we've seen over the last few weeks, these modern apostles aren't even a shadow of their biblical forebears. In any examination of the biblical marks of a true apostle, these modern apostles routinely fall short.

The fact is, the New Testament apostles served the Body of Christ in a specific, unique way that is unrepeatable. They weren't just gifted pastors, evangelists, and missionaries—they were the *foundation of the church*.

When writing his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul explained that his readers were part of God's household, "having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19–20). That passage equates the apostles with the church's foundation. It means nothing if it doesn't decisively limit apostleship to the earliest stages of church history. After all, a foundation is not something that can be rebuilt during every phase of construction. The foundation is unique, and it is always laid first, with the rest of the structure resting firmly above it.

When one considers the writings of the church fathers—those Christian leaders who lived shortly after the apostles—it quickly becomes evident that they regarded the foundational age of the church to be in the past. [1]cf. Nathan Busenitz, "Are There Still Apostles Today?," *The Cripple Gate*, July 21, 2011, <http://thecripplegate.com/are-there-still-apostles-today/> Ignatius (c. A.D. 35–115) in his *Epistle to the Magnesians*, spoke in the past tense of the foundation-laying work of Peter and Paul. Referring to the book of Acts, Ignatius wrote, "This was first fulfilled in Syria; for 'the disciples were called Christians at Antioch,' *when Paul and Peter were laying the foundations of the Church*" (emphasis added).

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus (c. 130–202) referred to the twelve apostles as "the twelve-pillared foundation of the church." Tertullian (c. 155–230) similarly explained that "*after* the time of the apostles" the only doctrine that true Christians accepted was that which was "proclaimed in the churches of *apostolic foundation*" (from *Against Marcion*, emphasis added). Lactantius (c. 240–320) in his *Divine Institutes* likewise referred to the past time in which the apostolic foundations of the church were laid. Commenting on the role of the twelve, he explained that "the disciples, being dispersed through the provinces, everywhere *laid the foundations of the Church*, themselves also in the name of their divine Master doing many and almost incredible miracles; for at His departure He had endowed them with power and strength, by which the system of their new announcement might be founded and confirmed."

Examples could be multiplied but the point is clear. Modern charismatics may claim that an *apostolic foundation* is still being laid today. But such a notion runs contrary to both the plain sense of

Scripture and the understanding of those Christian leaders who immediately followed the apostles in history: those leaders clearly understood the church's apostolic foundation to have been fully completed in the first century. Any notion of modern apostles would simply obliterate the meaning of Paul's metaphor in Ephesians 2:20. If the apostles constitute the foundation of the church, it is sheer folly to try to relocate them to the rafters.

The Importance of Apostolic Cessation

Modern charismatic leaders like Peter Wagner may argue for the continuation of the gift and office of apostleship; Roman Catholics might similarly insist on an apostolic succession that they apply to the pope. But both assertions are severely misguided. Any honest evaluation of the New Testament evidence reveals that the apostles were a unique group of men, handpicked and personally commissioned by the Lord Jesus Himself to lay the doctrinal foundation for the church, with Christ as the cornerstone. No one alive today can possibly meet the biblical criteria required for apostleship. And even in the first century, when all agree the miraculous gifts were fully operational, only a very select group of spiritual leaders were regarded as apostles.

In subsequent centuries, no church father claimed to be an apostle; rather, Christian leaders from the second century on saw the apostolic period as unique and unrepeatable. That was the consensus of the faithful—until the twenty-first century, when all of a sudden we are being told that we must once again accept the reemergence of apostles in the church. From a purely biblical perspective (and from any clear historical perspective as well), such modern assertions are as confused as they are conceited.

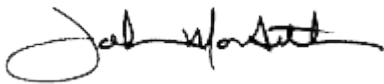
The reality is that the gift and office of apostleship ceased after the first century. When the apostle John went to heaven, the apostolate came to an end. Of course, apostolic influence has continued through the inspired Scriptures, which the apostles penned. But we should not think of the apostolic foundation as being perpetually laid throughout church history. It was completed within their lifetimes, never needing to be laid down again.

Look again at what the cessation of apostleship means for continuationist-charismatic doctrine. Clearly, not everything that happened in the New Testament church is still happening today. That is an inconvenient and embarrassing confession for any charismatic to make, because the apostolic office itself is a gift. Ephesians 4:11 plainly says so. If that office has ceased, we cannot insist, as charismatics do, that all the spiritual gifts described in Acts and 1 Corinthians have continued. In Thomas Edgar's words: "The fact that the gift of apostle ceased with the apostolic age is a devastating blow to the basic assumption underlying the entire charismatic perspective, namely, the assumption that all gifts are to be operative throughout the church age. We know that at least one gift ceased; therefore, their foundational assumption is incorrect." [2] Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, (Kregel Resources, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996) p. 232.

Some charismatics, recognizing that apostleship did not continue beyond the first century, attempt to argue that it was only an *office* and not a *gift*. Thus, they contend that while the apostolic *office* ceased, the miraculous *gifts* have all still continued. This clever attempt to circumvent the inevitable ramifications for the charismatic position ultimately falls flat, since *apostles* are listed in Paul's delineation of the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28–29, right alongside prophets, miracle workers, and tongues speakers. In the context, it is clearly one of the gifts Paul has in mind, flowing out of the argument he begins in verses 4–5 and concluding in verse 31 (where Paul uses the term *charisma* to

refer to the items he had just listed in verses 28–30). Additionally, Paul's point in Ephesians 4:11 is that *apostles* are given by Christ to His church. While it is true that *apostleship* was also an *office*, that does not preclude it from being a gift. Prophecy, for example, encompassed both an office and a gift, as did the gift of teaching.

In the end, despite the protests of some continuationists, there is no escaping the fact that one of the most significant features described in 1 Corinthians 12 (namely, *apostleship*) is no longer active in the church today. It ceased. To acknowledge that point is to acknowledge the foundational premise on which cessationism is based. If apostleship ceased, then not everything that characterized the New Testament church still characterizes the church today. Moreover, that opens the door to the real possibility that some of the other gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12–14 have also ceased.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur".

(Adapted from [Strange Fire](#).)

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