

The Function and Office of an Apostle as the Guide for Pastoral Leadership in the Contemporary Church

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Abstract

*The office and ministry of the 'apostles' is of great importance to the modern church in the understanding of what has been referred to as the apostolic church. There has been considerable debate over the origin of the apostolic church and the criteria for apostleship. Besides, the apostolic church and more so its succession has been literally understood. This has caused a lot of theological discussion. For instance, Reimund Bieringer (2003) has argued that *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* presupposes that, "the ordination of priests in the Catholic Church imitates Jesus' example of choosing the apostles." While on his part, Peter Schmidt has challenged the notion that tradition can go through the whole history unchanged, as though time is static (1995, p.45-49). Some modern-day ministers have embraced the title 'apostle' with others depicting reservations over its use in the contemporary setting. This debate necessarily prompts a theological historical exploration of the historicity or originality and meaning of the term 'apostle' and its applicable meaning for contemporary Christian pastoral leadership.*

Keywords: Apostle; Function; Office, Leadership, Pastoral

Introduction

As has already been stated, the office and ministry of the ‘apostles’ is of great importance to the modern church in the understanding of what has been referred to as the apostolic church. However, with time and more so in our contemporary times, the term and office of an apostle has been variedly applied pointing to a huge departure from its intended New Testament meaning. The task of this paper is to discuss the function and office of an apostle as a guide for pastoral leadership in the contemporary church. In order to do so, a historical theological approach is employed so as to attempt a reinstatement of this term for the benefit of the contemporary church.

The Origin and Meaning of the Term Apostolos

According to Fredrick Danker (2000, p.120-121), the English term apostle is derived from the Greek noun, ὁ ἀπόστολος, which is a derivative of the Greek compound verb ἀποστέλλω, translated to mean, to send forth or to dispatch. This verb frequently means to send with a certain purpose as opposed to the more neutral Greek word πέμπω, meaning to send someone or group of people (Danker, 2000, p.794-95). It denotes more of a function than a title of a certain group. Therefore, the verb ἀποστέλλω derives a noun ἀπόστολος, which qualifies the meaning of someone who is sent with a particular purpose to accomplish. The person is legitimately and authoritatively commissioned to represent and do something on behalf of the sender.

Moreover, John Line reveals that the Greek term ἀπόστολος could be equated or related to a Hebrew word, *shaliach*, meaning someone who has been sent as a representative, an envoy or an authorized agent on behalf of his sender. The Hebrew word *Shaliach*, in the context of Jewish society, was however attached to a variety of special functions of a legal or religious in nature. This kind of a representative could negotiate on behalf of the person he represented. But our primary focus is on the similar connection with ἀπόστολος, the Greek noun that parallels with *shaliach* of a Hebrew verb. In the Hebrew word *shaliach*, there is a principle of authority, in that, the one sent equals the sender in performing the intended duties.

In the New Testament, the same authority is portrayed in a scenario of God sending Christ with power, who in turn sends the apostles to preach about the kingdom of God, as all the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul attest. For instance, the term ἀπόστολος is used ten times in the four gospels.

Mark mentions it twice, Matthew uses it once, Luke six times and John once, and a total of thirty-four times in the Acts of the Apostles. The other occurrences are spread all over the New Testament with a higher percentage in the Pauline letters.

Let us now turn to the consideration of each of them in detail and try to see how the Synoptics, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Pauline Letters understand the term “apostle” and the content into, which people of that time understood it.

The Synoptics

The semblances of the term ἀπόστολος in Mark’s gospel appear in 3:14 (ἀποστέλλῃ) and 6:30 (ἀποστολοῖ) (see Batchman & Slaby, 1980, p.207). The Marcan use of ἀπόστολοι directly implies the twelve in connection with their mission. The discussion of the term ἀπόστολοι in Mark is initially limited to 6:30, where we read that: “*The apostles (Gk. ἀπόστολοι) returned to Jesus and told him what they had done and taught.*” Mark talks of Jesus appointing the twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach the gospel and to have authority to cast out demons (Mk 3:14). Here the verb ἀποστέλλω is used and not the noun ἀπόστολος with regard to their mission. Mark’s use of the verb instead of the noun has over scholarly period rendered “whom he also named apostles” as a later addition (see Robert Meye, 1968, p.175) to dismiss Mark’s awareness of the δώδεκα.

However, it may be too much reading to imply that Mark never knew the twelve. Equally it is suspicious that some translations insisting on the later addition “whom he also called apostles.” In line with Mark’s candor, it would be safe to read Mark sympathetically and leave the rendering without any additions. Therefore, it would not be problematic to read that at the time of return in Mk 6:30 the term ἀπόστολος is used to refer to a group. The use of the term ἀπόστολοι in 6:30 gives us an understanding that at first, they were a group of people with a limited mission in time and not yet a big ministry. Secondly, they were teaching as compared to preaching though this may depend on one’s understanding of the two words. Agreeably, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1977, p.117), argues that:

According to the commissioning scene (Mk 6:6b-13) they are neither explicitly authorized (v.7b) nor commissioned (vv. 8-10) to preach. Their preaching is only mentioned in the concluding statement in v.12 [but in indirect speech]. But in the concluding verse 13, Mark stresses again their power to heal and cast out demons. A careful reading of the text indicates that in Mark’s view the Twelve are primarily sent and have received the power of exorcism and healing, while Jesus is the one who proclaims the gospel of the kingdom.

In commissioning them, which happens in Mk 6:7, the notion is still the twelve though the term apostle is not mentioned. As we read in Mark, “Jesus began to send them two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits” (6:7). It is then, astonishing that in commissioning the Twelve, Jesus did not mention anything about preaching the good news and to whom, but he only gives them the authority to cast out demons. We wonder whether the intentions Jesus had in 3:14, and more so of preaching the gospel, is either forgotten or whether it was channeled to them in a way such that they knew it, hence there was no need of mentioning it here. What comes later in 6:12 is a report that they preached, cast out demons and healed the sick.

The account of appointing the twelve apostles is not found in Matthew or even giving them the title ‘apostle’ but rather referring to them as a unique group (Mt 10:1). Luke portrays a similar scene as Mark, “He called his disciples and he chose from them twelve whom he named apostles” (Lk. 6:13) (Mark also uses the same rendering οὗς καὶ ἀποστόλους ὠνόμασεν). He further goes on to list their names with Peter taking the lead (Lk 6:14-16). Luke does not mention the term apostles in 9:1-3, but it is sure that he is referring to the twelve who are given power and authority over all demons, to cure diseases and to proclaim the kingdom of God. Luke seems to understand the term apostle as a title to the twelve only.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reserves the title ἀπόστολος to the twelve though with one exception. In summarizing the occurrences of the term, Acts 1:2 reads “they are chosen by Jesus,” while 2:42-43 gives their job description, which is teaching. Chapter four and five of the Acts adds more pastoral duties to the twelve. These include: bearing witness to the resurrection (4:33), presiding over the distribution of property (4:34-37), performing signs and miracles (5:12), and administering the Holy Spirit (8:18). Additionally, in chapter 5:40 we find the twelve speaking in the name of Jesus, laying hands on the seven deacons 6:6. Something as well is mentioned concerning the other apostles that they remained in Jerusalem 8:1, 14; 11:1. In all the cited biblical references the title ἀπόστολοι, is strictly designed to the Twelve, though in Acts 14; 4, 14 Luke calls Paul and Barnabas, apostles. It is evident, however, that Paul and Barnabas, were not in the circle of the twelve following the list of their names. This brings another understanding of the term apostle. Who are these apostles?

In the Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, the title “apostles” and “elders” have been used to denote authority in the church of Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were appointed and sent by the Church from Antioch to Jerusalem. They are therefore ambassadors and messengers, as the term apostle is understood in this context (vv. 2). This is not to say that the twelve were not sent with a purpose, the usage of the term was more linked to a title than to a service. In Acts 1:21-22 it is taken for granted that the church was aware of what was implied by the status of apostle; they had to have been with Jesus the whole time of his earthly life, to have been witnesses of his resurrection and ascension. The qualifications of apostleship will be discussed later after examining Paul’s understanding of the term (Theodore Korteweg, 2008, p.8)

The noun *ἀπόστολος* is used once in John to indicate that the one who is sent is not greater than the one who sends him (John 13.16). The term *ἀπόστολος* in this context must essentially be regarded as the one who is sent and working on behalf of the higher authority who has sent him. The verb *ἀποστέλλω* is used interchangeably with *πέμπω* to denote Jesus being sent by the Father, and the sending of disciples by Jesus, respectively. In this case Jesus could be understood as a messenger sent by God. The gospel of John does not have an account of the appointing of the twelve.

However, it should be noted that although John does not amplify the calling of the apostles (mainly due to his concentration on Judean ministry), his assumption of their presence can be taken as an agreement with what the other gospel’s record. On account of their narrative twist, therefore, it can be noted that Mark and Luke are the only gospels that stress the title apostle being given to the twelve by Jesus himself at the scene of their appointment.

Pauline Epistles

Turning to the Pauline Letters, we find as well the term *ἀπόστολος* being used by Paul especially in his undisputed epistles which are earlier than the synoptics and the Acts of apostles. He used the term no less than 34 times in his epistles. Various occurrences of the term provide a basis in which the term can be understood. Paul uses the term interchangeably; in that it has more than the meaning we are familiar with, the twelve. P. W. Barnett (1993, p.47-48) describes Paul’s use of the term in two ways: in a technical and non-technical sense. In a non-technical sense, the noun apostle (*ὁ ἀπόστολος*) implies a mere messenger of the church sent by ordinary people like Paul. To start with, in 2 Cor 8:23, he sends *two brothers* of Macedonia, whom he calls messengers, *ἀπόστολοι*, to the Church in Corinth for a practical and financial mission. Secondly, when writing to the church at Philippi, he explains that due to illness, Epaphroditus was returning to them.

Epaphroditus was a Philippian church messenger (ἀπόστολον), and minister under the authority of Paul (Phil 2:25). This goes back again to the notion of the Hebrew word *Shaliach*, which denotes an envoy, though, Paul might have unconsciously employed it in his address. As Rudolf Schnackenburg (1970, p.287-303) has argued, the most likely explanation for the origin of these apostles in Pauline epistles, is that Paul may have borrowed the idea from the Jewish practice and applied it to the churches.

Furthermore, Paul in Romans 16:7 ascribes the title apostle to his relatives and fellow workers; that is, Andronicus and Junia(s) [Ἰουίαν], one of contentious conversation among the scholars about the gender of the name Junia(s) (See Eissen Ute, p.47). Paul's use of the term ἀπόστολοι in his reference also remains questionable bearing in mind that there were Christians before his conversion. Additionally, R. Schnackenburg argues that they did not claim "to an appearance of the risen Lord" (1970, p. 228) However, it remains a puzzle or rather a mystery as to why this title is not given to Timothy, Titus and others who would equally and highly deserve it. In line with Peter Schmidt (1995, p.45), it is not easy to tell exactly what duties Paul's apostles performed though preaching of the gospel seems to be one among the many.

The second sense of the term apostle is called a technical sense. It is a technical sense, because its application is only for the apostles of Christ (1Thess 2:6). These apostles are those who were sent by Christ himself and not by ordinary people. Moreover, the higher percentage of Paul's reference to the term ἀπόστολος belongs to this class. This can be divided further into other apostles, including Paul himself.

The Other Apostles

Paul is aware of the existence of other apostles before him whom he says are located in Jerusalem, (Gal 1:17), a statement that he repeats to the Corinthians in (1 Cor 15:5-9):

And that he appeared	to Cephas	then to the twelve ...
Then he appeared	to James	then to all the apostles.
Last of all he appeared	to me ...	the least of the apostles."

This helps us in distinguishing the twelve and the apostles. Cephas is placed among the twelve and James with all the apostles. Cephas who is Peter is referred to as an apostle in Gal 1:18-19; 2:8, thus bringing the understanding that he was one of the twelve, and that there were other apostles besides the twelve among whom James and Paul are included as claimed

above. Ideally, there are more than twelve apostles, since at times the term is interchangeably used with that of disciples. However, it is important to note that the New Testament writings accord the twelve a special place; with Paul probably contesting a thirteen space.

The Apostle Paul

Paul terms himself an “apostle” and he is fond of introducing himself in his epistles as the “apostle of Jesus Christ” or by a similar title as in Rom 1:1; 1Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1. Again, similar designation appears in some of Deutero-Pauline (Eph 1:1; Col 1:1) and Tritro-Pauline (1Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1). It is through the Damascus Road experience that Paul received his call to apostleship (Acts 9:1ff; Gal 1:11-17). Paul’s call to the apostleship is also shown in his letter to the Philippians’ (3:4-17), though some scholars dispute this call preferring the incident to be his conversion (see Schnackenburg, 1970, p.291). His vision of the risen Christ at Damascus and the commissioning makes the titles stand for him. Béda Rigaux affirms Paul’s apostleship by arguing that if Jesus showed himself to “all the apostles” (1Cor 15:7), he showed himself to Paul also (1 Cor 15:8-9) (1968, p.11).

A perusal of Paul reveals that his understanding of his apostleship may not directly harmonize with that of Luke based on the basis of the criteria of apostleship given in Acts (Acts 1:12-26). Therefore, Paul resists by modifying the Lukan criteria of having known and being with the historical Jesus personally and physically as the only valid qualification to apostleship (see 2 Cor 5:16). Rudolf Schnackenburg (1968, p.11) has argued that if being a witness to the resurrection of Jesus was one of the criteria, then Paul qualifies, since he claimed to have had a vision of the risen Lord (Gal 1:16, 1 Cor 9:1-5, 15:1-10) on his way to Damascus which was not only experienced by Paul alone but also those who were near him. If founding churches was the criterion, Paul had worked hard more than anyone else as demonstrated in 1 Cor 15: 10.

He was also sent by Jesus and hence given a unique role of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He affirms to be a called apostle, as the former chosen disciples of the historical Jesus, not appointed by a human person or rather any human agency (Gal 1:1-1b) but by the risen Christ himself. This equals Paul with the unique group of the historical Jesus.

Paul's own understanding of his mission as an apostle also slightly differs with the Lucan concept of the criteria to apostleship. The first criterion based on Acts 1:12-22, and 10:39-41 stipulates that one had to have accompanied Jesus all the time during his earthly life. The second one based on a reading of Luke 6:12-13 and Acts 1:23-26 supposes that they had to be directly appointed by Jesus Christ. A qualification, which could be undermined considering the selection of Matthias; though the final decision was left to the Lord in the drawing of the lots. A third criterion based on a reading of Acts 1:1-8 was the reception of the Holy Spirit, which was given to enable them to witness to Christ so that they may inherently speak the word of God by divine inspiration. It was also to enable them to back up their testimony with supernatural signs and wonders Pannenberg, Wolfhart, 2004, p.394).

Paul's Apostleship Questioned

Paul was aware that his apostleship was in dispute as can be seen in 1 Cor 9:1, where he defended his freedom, his apostleship and his privilege of seeing the risen Christ. As he enquired: "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord..." (1 Cor 9:1)? Rudolf Schnackenburg affirms the dispute of Paul's apostleship in arguing that the designation of Paul as "apostle of Jesus Christ" (cf. 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1) indicated his apostleship had been questioned from various sides (Schnackenburg, p.295). However, Paul overcame this opposition by working harder — if they preached the Christ crucified and risen, so did he (1Cor 15:3-5, 11). The resistance indicates an earlier knowledge of whom an apostle was and what qualifications one had to meet to attain such title – a true resurrection appearance did not occur to Paul, hence disputing his apostleship. This casts a picture that Paul was not one of the twelve disciples according to the understanding of the early Christians. He never backed off but the dispute rather stimulated him to fight for this title. Moreover, the Damascus Road experience with the risen Lord was enough to qualify Paul as an apostle. Though he did not accompany the earthly Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, as had the others, Paul met all the qualification of an apostle and did so by the Lord's special grace (cf., 1 Cor 15.10).

Ministry of the Apostolate

Apostleship is directly connected with Jesus' own ministry. From the gospel we read that Jesus began his ministry by preaching the reign of God empowered by the Spirit. He preached with authority and power that influenced people's behavior, who in turn followed him to become his disciples.

They listened to his teaching and experienced a conversion, a form of renewal. It is from these converts, the disciples, that he selected the twelve whom according to Luke he gave the name Apostles.

Origin of the Apostolate

The origin of the Apostolate lies in a special origin, which is a formal appointment by the Lord to a determined office. This office is connected with authority and duties, which are attested in three synoptic gospels and the Pauline epistles hence undeniable. The choice and the duties they were endowed with, acknowledges their authority, which should be understood as service rather than rank. It is through the mission of serving that they were able to exercise Jesus' own ministry, not only the Galilean mission but also after his death and resurrection though Paul is the only prominent post-resurrection apostle (John O'Grady, 1968, p.79).

Jesus commissioned the apostles, who are therefore the reference point for the origin of the Churches. In other words, the origin of the ministry of Christian Church relies upon the understanding of the ministry of Jesus through the apostles as attested in the gospels. O'Grady (1968, p.79) affirms Jesus' choice and commission of the twelve as he points it out:

We have reason to doubt that Jesus historically chose twelve out of the group of disciples and also that these individuals would function within the early church. In fact, we have passages in the New Testament in which Jesus gives to the twelve a solemn and continuing commission.

Functions and Office of the Apostles

A consideration of Mk 3:14-15 and Mt 10:1 accounts of apostles' appointment reveals some level of redaction. Mark 3:14-15 mentions that Jesus appointed the twelve to be with him and to be sent to preach the good news, and to have power to heal and to cast out demons. Matthew 10:1 observes that he gave them power over unclean spirits so as to expel them and to heal every disease and every illness. This is evidence that they were with him and helped him proclaim the gospel though limited in the land of Israel and for a certain period of time.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1977, p.117), however, disputes the authority of preaching the gospel as stressed by some commentaries; instead, she emphasizes their empowerment to heal and to cast out demons in reference to their commissioning in Mark (Mk 6:6b-13).

The nature of the apostolic mission was clarified by the sayings of Christ after his resurrection. As Reimund Bieringern (2003) succinctly explains it:

During his historical life, Jesus gave a mission to the twelve, which was limited in time and space. During the appearances after the resurrection Jesus gave to the twelve and according to Paul and John also to others, a universal mission to the ends of the earth, which would claim their whole lives until death. This universal mission involves an apostolic ministry.

The universal mission means preaching to the whole world forever until his second coming and a promise that he will be with them until the end of ages (Mt 28:19). The fourth gospel also bears witness to the same tradition as it reads: *Even as the father sent me, I also sent you, when he said this he breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained,* (Jn 20:21-23). The same way, Luke associates the giving of the Holy Spirit with their sending.

It is interesting how the apostles' (especially the twelve) mission and their specific whereabouts is not recorded after the resurrection with an exception of Peter and John who are said to be in Jerusalem by the time Paul arrives there. Paul is the best-known post resurrection apostle and we know more about his mission than about anyone else of his time. He mentions James the brother of Jesus who was by then the leader of the church in Jerusalem though an apostle but not one of the twelve. Paul in a way makes us aware that, it is impossible to know the achievements of their mission and how hard they worked. Peter Schmidt just points it to us how Peter and John left Jerusalem to go to Rome and Ephesus respectively, but no more does he comment on them or on their ministry upon their arrival in those mission areas (1995, p.59). Paul is left alone in the scene and tries to convince us that he worked more than the apostles though he later ascribes it to the grace of God (1 Cor 15: 10).

The various post-Easter commissioning in the New Testament, Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:48-49, John 20:19-23 do not give information of what happened in history but rather in a theological perspective present the establishment of apostolic mission. It follows

immediately, therefore, that Jesus started the apostolic ministry in which the twelve had a share.

They had a share in the authority of the Lord to bear witness to him when raised, to spread the gospel, to teach, and to baptize knowing that he would continue to be among them in their ministry through the Holy Spirit. They would also fulfill the eschatological mission of judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28, Lk 22:30).

Apostolic Succession

Historically, the succession of the apostles has been a heated discussion throughout biblical scholarly debates. With regard to the twelve disciples, who are our starting point, succession is attested once. Matthias was chosen to succeed Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus and hence failed in his mission. Otherwise, no other succession mentioned, even after the martyrdom of James no one is chosen to replace him (Acts 12:2). The circle of the twelve was a unique group; no one could replace them, because in later generation there was no one who has had direct contact with Jesus. They had a personal contact with Jesus Christ and not to mention their appointment. The personal contact and relation with earthly Jesus was not possible for others. However, this is not to say that there is no apostolic succession. The mission of the apostles did not pass away; it was channeled down to all people in all the earth who accepted Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit (Louis B., S. J. Pascoe 2004, p.41). As has already been stated, there were more apostles than the twelve, and apostle Paul, his co-workers were quite active in spreading the gospel doing the same mission the apostles did. Therefore, the mission of preaching the gospel even up to today goes back to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles (Mt 16:18; Eph 2:20).

There are a number of ministries in the New Testament, not only the apostles but also prophets, teachers, deacons, and overseers. Historically and theologically, the ministry of Jesus and the apostles is understood as the foundation of various ministries (Mt 16:18; Eph 2:20; 1 Cor 12:28). Paul understands the ministries as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As in 1 Cor 12:28: "... then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues."

Nevertheless, the New Testament does not explicitly testify that the living apostolate would continue. So far, there is no record of apostles appointing their personal successors nor were any criteria left for a replacement or recognition of future apostles.

When Paul was nearing his death, he did not appoint Timothy to succeed his apostleship, rather, he charged Timothy to retain the standard of the sound words which he had learnt from his ministry (2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2).

Secondly, the living apostolate was historically unique and unrepeatable because of its connection with Jesus' appearances after his resurrection. In later centuries there will be no one who would legitimately qualify as a personal witness of the resurrected Christ. For the case of another vision like Paul, it is worth noting that this happened close to the resurrection of Jesus and also during the lifetime of the other apostles who would also recognize Paul, as legitimate apostle, due to the experience they had with the risen Christ and his post resurrection appearances.

The apparent use of 'apostle' to denote a title forbears strict conditions that may be unrepeatable owing to the time closeness of the resurrection of Jesus. As for its second use, denoting 'service' and or ministration, there is no notable limitation although one may question the self-proclamation and forbearing of the title, apostle, if Paul's criterion stands as a yardstick. The contemporary use of the title apostle calls for further investigation into its understanding and connotation in the contemporary missions. Appropriating the apostolate within the modern setting goes a long way in multiplying and creating new faith communities, in the spirit of fulfilling the great commission.

Conclusion

The use of the term *ἀπόστολος* in the New Testament has three meanings; first it was used in its non-technical sense to denote a mere messenger sent with a specific information to deliver. Secondly, it was used as a title for the twelve disciples who were chosen by Jesus and then finally, it refers to those who were sent by the Risen Christ, in which comprises apostle Paul and others. In reality, there is no much information concerning the structure of the early church and its leadership roles.

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