

## **WORD STUDY: The Use of the Word APOSTLE in the New Testament**

**Adopted and edited by Bob Young**

[Note: various sources were used in the development of this brief study]

Traditionally we have struggled with a biblical understanding of the word apostle, and with the function of those who are called apostles in the New Testament. Jesus is called an apostle in Hebrews 3, in the sense of “one sent.” We have struggled with the list of leaders in Eph. 4:11-12 and have little understanding of why Paul mentions apostles. (We equally have little place for the concept of prophet, and do not use the idea of evangelist frequently, but this is a study of apostle.)

A problem with using the word apostle in many church contexts is that such use is open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Some preachers have begun to refer to themselves as apostles. Confusion exists because today the term is almost exclusively identified with the Twelve, apostles in training during Jesus’ ministry, those whom he sent forth, a unique group with unique roles and abilities in the first century church.

For Luke, in his gospel and Acts, apostle refers to the Twelve, those close disciples and companions of Jesus. The only exception is in Acts 14:14. Martin Garner gave a possible explanation for the use in Acts 14, “Perhaps he [Luke--by] did this to counter the Gnostic challenge. Apostolos had contemporaneous use in Gnostic circles. In later years, it became necessary to establish Jesus’ true apostles, those who were witnesses of his life, teaching and resurrection, vs. false Gnostic apostles. It is important to note that Luke’s use of the word comes after Paul’s use of the word.”

When Paul speaks of apostles, it is never with reference to the Twelve. He uses the word, not to refer to apostles of Christ but to apostles of the churches. These who were representatives of the churches were sent forth by the churches in the advance of the gospel and the planting of churches. Continuing the comparison, Paul has 34 uses of the word, Luke 27 (including the exception noted above where the reference is not to the Twelve; thus 26 references to the Twelve). Paul identifies a number of apostles by name: Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, James the Lord’s brother, Apollos, Junias, Andronicus, Epaphroditus; and he includes himself in this larger group, not as one of the Twelve, nor as equal to the Twelve. Garner argues that if Paul’s use is the original use, we should not allow Luke’s more restrictive understanding to become normative today.

The role described in the New Testament is significantly different than the way the term is used by a number of self-proclaimed apostles today. Some with supercharged egos give themselves the title to enhance their standing as celebrity pastors or leaders of a religious franchise.

Garner emphasizes that apostles “are made for adventure, risks, hardship, adversity, constantly opening new fields under difficult circumstances.... They tackle the impossible. They have eyes of faith for the mission in a way that can never be fulfilled in a local church. They talk to strangers. They start from scratch (again and again) with no resources. They go to hard places, tackling fear and prejudice. They communicate the good news to those who are hardest to reach. They live without financial security. They are made by God to do this; it is hardship to the rest of us, but is fulfillment to them.”

I like this description: deep passion, unswerving commitment, leading people to Christ, birthing faith communities, constantly trying to escape institutional Christianity. Personal humility, dependence on Lord, sharing the vision, listening to others, understanding the challenges.

The most important thing to say is that no one takes this title to self. One is an apostle because someone else sends him. An apostle is a representative, one who is sent. Christ sent Twelve—that is Luke’s point. Paul’s point is that many others were sent by the churches.

I am not suggesting we adopt apostle as the description of every missionary or other person who goes forth from our churches. We must be careful that we do not miscommunicate the Bible message by using words outside the normal understandings of the word, even if we are technically correct and biblical. Rather, I am encouraging a biblical study and a greater understanding of how this word is used in the New Testament.