

Five-Fold Ministry Gifts

Part 2: Apostle

The Marks of an Apostle

There are various interpretations on what marks an apostle. Some are influenced by presumption and some by prejudice: The presumption can be by those who would like to consider themselves apostles and the prejudice can be by those who would deny that apostles are for today. The following are what I consider to be the five definitive biblical marks of an apostle. All five of these have to be in place in order for someone to be considered an apostle:

They are Sent to Preach the Gospel

As noted earlier, Apostle means “one who is sent.” 132 times the verb form of apostle is used in the New Testament. Jesus told the twelve, “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*” (John 20:21). When the twelve were chosen as “apostles” they knew, by definition, that they were chosen to be sent. *He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach* (Mark 3:14). Jesus called them to be with him so that he could send them. What was Paul’s commission as an Apostle? *This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel* (Acts 9:15). So first and foremost, an apostle is one who is sent by God. While an apostolic commission often includes the sending out by human agency (i.e. Saul and Barnabas from Antioch in Acts 13), the true commissioning of an apostle can only come from heaven. For even though the church at Antioch laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them out, Paul considered himself *an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father...* (Galatians 1:1).

The prime directive of the apostle is to preach the gospel. The first call on the twelve was, “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*” (Matthew 4:19). Paul said, “*When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*” (1 Corinthians 9:16). Consider, again, Mark 3:14: *He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.* Paul said that he was *appointed to be a herald and an apostle* (2 Timothy 2:7). There are dozens of other scriptures that relate the apostolic calling to the preaching of the gospel. Also connected with the apostolic calling, at least in the heart of Paul, is the desire to break new ground with the gospel. Paul said, “*It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation*” (Romans 15:20). This is why some consider missionaries to be the modern-day apostles. While it can be said that most of the early apostles, including the Lord Jesus himself, were missionaries—being a missionary is not synonymous with being an apostle. If you are an apostle, however, chances are that you will be continually breaking new ground with the gospel.

They Perform Signs, Wonders and Miracles

It is presumptive to claim to be in the office of an apostle of Christ without the working of miracles, signs and wonders in your ministry. This is clear in the context of Paul’s discussion of his own apostolic ministry as he wrote to the saints at Corinth: *The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance* (2 Corinthians 12:12). Paul also said, *I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit* (Romans 15:17-19). Concerning the apostles at Jerusalem, the Scripture says that *everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles* (Acts 2:43). If the day of signs, wonders and miracles are over, then indeed, the day of the apostle is over. Some would argue that signs, wonders and miracles are harder to come by in

North America (because of the pervasive scientific empirical worldview which results in so much unbelief), so signs and wonders need not mark a North American apostle. They would be right on the first count but not on the second because, often, the very thing that is needed to overcome the mindset of unbelief is signs and wonders. Miracles are meant to mark the gospel as well as the apostle.

They Function Fully in all of the other Ministry-Gift Offices

It has been said that if the five fingers of the hand could represent the five-fold ministry, the thumb would be the apostle because it touches all four of the other gifts.¹ As noted earlier, Paul received his call as an apostle on the Damascus Road (Acts 9) but did not come into his designation as an apostle until years later (Acts 13:9). It was only after he had come into his own as an evangelist, as a shepherd, as a prophet and as a teacher that he stepped into the shoes an apostle. If you look at Paul's ministry leading up to Acts 13:9 you will see that he first functioned as an evangelist (Acts 9:19-30). Then, when Barnabas brought "Saul" to Antioch, they disciplined the believers there and he no doubt had a role in shepherding the church (Acts 11:26). And then, in Acts 13:1, we see that Saul had the specific designations of *prophet* and *teacher*. I am convinced that you cannot be an apostle without the zeal of an evangelist, the heart of a pastor, the acumen of a teacher and the insight of a prophet. A full-fledged apostle must first be a full-fledged evangelist, prophet, shepherd and teacher.

They Must Suffer for the Sake of the Gospel

The Lord Jesus said this about Paul: "*This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name*" (Acts 9:15-16). The first call of an apostle is to carry the name of Jesus and the second call is to suffer for that name. When James and John asked to sit in places of honour in heaven the Lord asked them, "*Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?*" (Mark 10:38). The cup and baptism of suffering is part and parcel of the apostolic call. The honour to be an apostle of Christ will be accompanied by the honour of suffering for his name (i.e. Acts 5:41). Jesus warned the twelve that great persecution would accompany their witness for the gospel (see Mark 13:9ff; Matthew 24:9ff; John 15:18ff). In fact, history and tradition reports that of the eleven apostles who were left after Judas' death, only John was not martyred for the sake of the name of Christ—and John was exiled after the authorities attempted to execute him but were unsuccessful. Paul's testimony was that he bore in his body the *marks of Jesus* (Galatians 6:17). He recounts the experience of his apostolic ministry:

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle... We are fools for Christ... we are dishonored!... we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. – 1 Corinthians 4:9-13

I have...been in prison...been flogged...and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked... -2 Corinthians 11:23-27

We are all called to suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus, but the apostle, especially so.

They Walk in Uncommon Authority:

There is such a thing as apostolic authority. Though hard to quantify, it is connected to and flows out of the above four signs. When Paul defended his apostolic authority, these were the signs to which he pointed. He said the authority he had was for the purpose of building the church up, not tearing them down

(see 2 Corinthians 13:10). Jesus gave the twelve *power and authority* (Luke 9:1) when he sent them out. As ambassadors of the Lord Jesus, we are all called to walk in his authority but apostles consistently walk in a high and recognizable level of authority based on their calling, their power, their function and their suffering. There are false apostles and cult leaders who draw many after them because of a perceived authority but the authority of the apostle of Christ is distinguishable by its humility and kingdom focus.

Misconceptions

There are two major and other minor misconceptions concerning what marks an apostle:

Jesus Must Appear to You: When Paul was defending his apostolic authority to the Corinthians, he said, “*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?*” (1 Corinthians 9:1). Some take this to mean that in order to be an apostle, you must have seen Christ face to face. Yes, the fact that Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road (and perhaps elsewhere) does strengthen Paul’s argument for apostolic authority. But Paul is not saying that that Jesus must appear to you in order for you to be an apostle. The statement, “*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?*” is not an explanation of the previous statement, “*Am I not an apostle?*” It is an additional statement in the larger context of Paul’s claim to ecclesial authority. It does not follow that Jesus must appear to you for you to be an apostle any more than you are necessarily an apostle if Jesus does appear to you. Did Jesus appear to all of the post-ascension New Testament apostles, like Silas and Barnabas and Timothy? Probably not.

Apostles are Perfect: There is this underlying assumption that if someone were to be an apostle, they could never be or do wrong. While apostles, and all those who walk in positions of higher authority have a greater responsibility to exercise sound judgment and moral conduct, apostles are not perfect. The reason that Paul was given his thorn in the flesh was so that he would not become conceited by the great revelations he had received. It can be said that both he and Peter, the two greatest apostles of the New Testament, had times, as apostles, when they missed the mark (i.e., Galatians 2:11ff; Acts 23:3-5).

Minor Misconceptions Regarding the Marks of an Apostle: There are also a number of things that apostles may do—in fact, probably will do—that some take to be marks of an apostle, but are not things that necessarily define an apostle. For instance:

- **Oversight of Churches:** There are those who have oversight of a number of churches in a movement or a denomination and are considered an apostle as such. It makes perfect sense that you would want an apostle in such a position but the position itself does not make one an apostle. Having oversight of churches does not define an apostle (a true apostle would probably feel confined by such a position). However, if someone has started a movement of churches, chance are pretty good that that person is an apostle.
- **Planting of Churches:** The most effective church planters are apostles because the things which mark an apostle equip them to start and maintain healthy churches. But, again, planting a church or churches does not necessarily define someone as an apostle.
- **Other examples of things that apostles may do but cannot be taken as proof that someone is an apostle:**
 - Go on mission trips.
 - Appoint elders in the church.
 - Set things in order in the church.
 - Make decisions regarding proper doctrine and practice.

Examples of Post-New Testament Apostles

It is completely consistent with the New Testament record that apostles would be given by Jesus to the church throughout her existence. It follows that if there were a number of New Testament apostles besides the original twelve, that there would continue to be apostles given to the church until the fulfillment of Ephesians 4:13. So, a very good question, then is, “Who are some examples of post-New Testament apostles?” Using the biblical criteria outlined above, the following would be some examples apostles that the Lord Jesus has given to the church:

Patrick of Ireland (389-463)² was born of British-Romano descent, the grandson of a Catholic priest (celibacy had not yet been imposed on the clergy). At the age of sixteen, while a nominal Christian, Patrick was abducted from England, taken to Ireland and was sold into slavery. It was there that Patrick called on the name of the Lord and became a man of prayer as he spent his waking moments tending the flocks of his owner. At the age of twenty-two, the voice of the Lord led Patrick out of Ireland and he found safe passage home. Giving himself to training for the ministry of the priesthood, Patrick felt the call of the Lord to return to Ireland and bring the gospel and arrived back in 431. Signs, wonders and miracles followed his ministry as he confronted the pervasive paganism of the Druids. Virtually all of Ireland was converted under his apostolic ministry and Ireland became a light for the gospel in the dark ages. Conservative estimates say that in the first twelve years of his ministry, 120,000 Irish were converted and 300 churches were planted.

More than any other person, John Wesley (1703-1791) changed the face and social fabric of 18th Century England. The son of an Anglican priest, he too entered the ministry of the Church of England but became disillusioned with a lack of spiritual vibrancy in the church as well as his own personal life. Seeking a more meaningful life in Christ, he was influenced greatly by the Moravians and came into a deeper and more empowering experience in the Lord. He attempted to bring reform to the Church of England through what became known as “Methodism,” a methodical and personal approach to Christian discipleship including the regular meeting of small holiness groups. Wesley travelled hundreds of thousands of miles on horseback to preach the gospel in open air meetings leading tens of thousands to Christ. Although he never officially left the Anglican Church, the Methodist and Wesleyan denominations were direct offshoots of his ministry and many of the “Holiness” Churches of the next century can also be traced back to the ministry and teaching of John Wesley. Many social reforms were credited to Wesley and the Methodist revival in the Church of England including, abolition of the slave trade, child labour reform, prison reform and the inception of public education. Many historians believe that because of Wesley and his ecclesial and social influence, England was spared the kind of bloody revolution that ravaged France during that same period.

Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944)³ began her ministry as an itinerant evangelist in her 20’s after receiving the call of God on her death bed to preach the gospel. Beginning as a revival preacher, Sister Aimee travelled extensively by auto, distributing tones of gospel literature and preaching in the open air. Soon, in virtually every city in which she preached, her meetings would swell in attendance so by the end of typical three-week campaign the largest auditorium in the city was not big enough to house the throngs (up to thirty-thousand) who would come to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Miracles and healings were regular occurrences in her meetings and well-documented by the secular press but were always secondary to her emphasis on saving precious souls. Her five-year evangelistic campaign from 1917-1922 was probably the most effective evangelistic thrust in the history of North America—at the end of which she was the most recognizable figure in all of America. During the great depression, her Angelus Temple was the most active welfare agency in Los Angeles. She pioneered radio preaching and is the founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel which today numbers five million adherents and thirty-thousand churches worldwide.

John Wimber (1934-1997) was, in his own words, a fourth generation pagan, who came to Christ as his marriage was in crisis. As he began to read the Bible as a completely un-indoctrinated new Christian he assumed that modern-day Christians were to do the “stuff” that the early church was noted for. He led hundreds to the Lord in his first two years in the faith. Consequently, he was made a staff pastor at his church, but he soon became disillusioned with church politics and religion and resigned to become a church growth advisor. Soon after, he was challenged by his wife’s home group to help them start a new church as it’s pastor and agreed to the Lord’s call on the condition that they could “do the stuff” in the Bible. After a prolonged season of contending for miracles and healing, the breakthrough came and John eventually became the leader of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship movement which exploded in numbers and influence bringing revival to a significant portion of the North American and British Church.

Bill Johnson (1951- present) is the Senior Pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California and oversees Global Legacy, a network of hundreds of churches and ministries intent on pursuing true apostolic Christianity. Currently there are about 3000 persons attending Bethel Church—half of which are students in their Supernatural School of Ministry who take the gospel to Redding and the world with an emphasis on prophetic and power evangelism. Bill is a prophet, teacher, pastor and healing evangelist. Signs, wonders, miracles and healings are a consistent part of the ministry of Bill Johnson and Bethel church.

These five examples of apostolic ministries are mentioned because they are well-known and documented in the English-speaking world. But there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lesser-known apostles fulfilling the call of God all over the globe. They all have some level of notoriety and recognition as apostolic figures, walking in the signs that mark an apostle.

Conclusion

Be aware that there are also false apostles, for the precious and valuable will always be counterfeited. Paul said, “*For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ*” (2 Corinthians 11:13); and Jesus said, “*I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false*” (Revelation 2:2). Remember the biblical marks of an apostle, for by their fruit you will know them (see Matthew 7:16-20).

Concerning this ministry, someone might ask, “Should I pursue an apostolic calling.” The answer is, “No.” No one can take such a call upon themselves (see Galatians 1:1; Hebrews 5:4) and considering the apostolic call to suffering, I can’t imagine who would want to. On the other hand, those who know that they have an apostolic calling need to pursue the fulfillment of it for many are called but few are chosen. The apostolic call always begins with soul winning in the power of God and moves into the establishment of these new believers through the full operation of the prophetic, teaching and shepherding offices.

¹ I first heard this concept from Kenn Gill, apostolic leader of The Ripple Centre church in Calgary, Alberta

² Taken mainly from *The Miracles of the Saints*, Bert Ghezzi, Zondervan, Grand Rapids (1996)

³ For more on the life and ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson, I recommend her first autobiography, *This is That* (1923) available from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; and from the viewpoint of a secular historian, Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York (1993)