

## **Apostles and the New Testament Church**

### **A Series on Apostleship: Part 3**

Because the Bible uses the term “apostle” with different meanings, it has been difficult to understand the role of apostles in the New Testament church. What kind of apostles were the Twelve while Jesus was on earth? In what sense were they apostles after the Ascension? How were they different from those apostles who only saw the resurrected Jesus? Do apostles exist today? And how does the spiritual gift of apostleship affect our understanding of apostles?

The twelve apostles of Jesus Christ are well known, because Jesus chose them (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16), replaced Judas Iscariot with Matthias (Acts 1:12-26), accompanied Jesus from His baptism by John until His ascension (Acts 1:21-22), and occupy a unique eschatological position sitting at Jesus’ dining table and on thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30; Rev 21:14).

However, when the eleven apostles were with Christ before His resurrection, were they simply messengers (i.e. šālīḥ - to learn more, see the article: What does the term apostle mean? at [www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/OrgApostleWhatDoesItMean.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/OrgApostleWhatDoesItMean.aspx)) or were they true lifelong authoritative representatives of Jesus?

They certainly had the power and authority of Jesus to cast out demons, heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:1; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6).

Yet other Believers outside of the group of disciples had the ability to heal in His name (Mark 9:38-41; Luke 9:49-50).

Jesus perceived his newly appointed apostles as “disciples”, “learners” in training (Matt 10:24-11:1).

And they had doubts about their faith and an incomplete understanding of their faith (John 6:59-70; Matt 8:23-27; Mark 4:37-41; Luke 8:22-25; Matt 16:5-12; Mark 8:16-21).

At times, they failed at healing (Matt 17:16-21; Mark 9:17-29; Luke 9:38-43).

Jesus appointed seventy more messengers to prepare villages for His visit and lodging by endowing them with the power and authority of His name to cast out demons, heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:1-17). Whether these messengers keep their spiritual endowment or followed Christ later the Bible is silent.

In preparing for His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus sends messengers very much in line with the Jewish institution of “šālīḥ” (Matt 21:1-7; Mark 11:1-7; Luke 19:29-35; Matt 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:8-13).

With the crucifixion of Jesus, the eleven disciples stayed behind locked doors in fear of the Jews and initially did not believe in Jesus’ resurrection (Matt 28:16-17; Luke 24:9-11, 13-41; John 20:19-29).

Given the biblical data documenting their lack of faith, it seems likely that the appointed disciples were apostles in the sense that they were simply messengers that, at times, were endowed with limited spiritual power. Their function was akin to the first century Jewish institution of “šālīḥ.” They were not apostles of Christ in the sense as having the dedication, spiritual power and authority to represent Jesus in His absence.

This view provides a better understanding of why Judas Iscariot is on the list of apostles (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16).

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Despite having seen the resurrected Lord on three prior occasions, some of the eleven disciples still had doubts of Jesus' resurrection just prior to His Ascension (Matt 28:16-17). Jesus had to reprove them for their unbelief and hardness of heart (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43) before He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44-45). And with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18), He commands them to stay in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4) until they are "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).

Ten days after the Ascension, Jesus sends His Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2:1-12), and from this point on a remarkable change has occurred in the apostles. They speak boldly and with a firm grasp of the Scriptures (Acts 2:37, 40-47; 4:13-14, 19-20), which they fully learned just ten days earlier (Luke 24:44-45).

This remarkable and confident understanding of theology and doctrine does not seem to be humanly possible to acquire in ten days. Paul informs the church of Ephesus that when Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave gifts to men (Eph 4:7-13), and the first one he lists is apostles, whose role is foundational in the building of the church (Eph 2:20-21; 1 Cor 12:28-29). It would seem that this knowledge of theology and doctrine is supernatural and a contrast to the apostles' prior role as "šālīḥāḥ."

While the Bible is not clear, the biblical data suggests that one could only be an Apostle of Jesus Christ if they were gifted with the spiritual gift of apostleship. These anointed men considered apostleship as an official position appointed by Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 1:20-26).

As personal representatives of Jesus, they had the unique and divine authority of bringing the word of God to men (Eph 3:5) and lay the theological foundation for the church (Eph 2:20).

Their ability of performing miracles attested to their personal witness of Jesus (Acts 4:13-20; 2 Cor 12:12).

They organized the local churches and appointed officers (Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5-9).

They had the authority to administer discipline (Acts 5:1-10; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor 4:21; 2 Cor 13:2).

Then as now their words established doctrine (1 Thess 1:5; 2:13), and their authority was absolute (Acts 6:2-6). Their writings form the New Testament which there is no higher appeal in matters of doctrinal dispute.

Despite the suggestion of more apostles (1 Cor 15:5-7), the Bible clearly identifies fifteen apostles of Christ: the Twelve where Matthias replaces Judas Iscariot, James, Barnabas and Paul.

When Paul identifies himself as the last of the apostles who saw the resurrected Christ, it suggests that there were no more apostles of Christ after him (1 Cor 15:8-11).

It seems apparent that the first century church considered the apostles of Christ to be a small and finite number as Paul had to defend his apostleship several times (1 Cor 9:1-2), and on nine occasions identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:1). It was important to Paul to establish that this was a personal commission by Jesus Christ.

Like the other apostles of Christ, Paul learned his theology and doctrine directly from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-24).

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Do apostles of Christ still exist today? Given the biblical qualifications of an apostle of Christ, it does not seem likely. Perhaps more telling is that their role of establishing the foundation of the church has been a complete success.

While its authorship is still debated, the gospel of **Matthew** is believed to be authored by the apostle Matthew.

Peter, the first apostle to be called, was the author of **1** and **2 Peter**. Papias, writing around 125 A.D., indicated that Peter's preaching inspired John Mark who was Peter's interpreter in Rome, and Eusebius indicated that John Mark composed the gospel of **Mark** while in the service of Peter.

Luke, the Gentile physician, is credited as being the author of the gospel **Luke** and the book of **Acts**. While he was not an apostle, he traveled and labored closely with the apostle Paul who was dedicated to the ministry of the Gentiles.

The apostle John authored the gospel of **John**, **1**, **2** and **3 John** and **Revelation**.

The apostle Paul authors several epistles: **Romans**, **1** and **2 Corinthians**, **Galatians**, **Ephesians**, **Philippians**, **Colossians**, **1** and **2 Thessalonians**, **1** and **2 Timothy**, **Titus**, and **Philemon**.

The author of **Hebrews** is largely unknown; however, its contents are linked to the apostle Paul or someone very close to him.

The apostle James wrote the epistle of **James**.

The letter from **Jude** is recognized as being written by the brother of the apostle James who was the half brother of Jesus; thus, Jude was a half brother of Jesus.

While the apostles of Christ in all probability do not exist today, apostles of the church may certainly exist in the fashion of the first century "šālīḥ." Appointed for a specific task, these messengers may represent the church until that task has been completed.

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