

What are the characteristics of an apostle? A Series on Apostleship: Part 2

While the Gospels explicitly list the apostles (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16 and Acts 1:13), they all started out as disciples. What characteristics are attributed to the apostles?

Believed to be written before Luke and Acts, the epistles of Paul are considered the earliest sources and therefore most likely the earliest understanding of the term “apostolos.” As opposition grew towards Christianity, Paul wrote defending his apostleship and provided some details about this designation.

The call and commissioning of an apostle to lifelong service comes through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Gal 1:1; Rom 1:1-5; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1).

The call comes through a personal meeting with the resurrected Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:4-9; Gal 1:15-16).

The risen Lord Jesus Christ Himself gave the message of the gospel to the apostle (Gal 1:12; 1 Cor 11:23-25; 2 Cor 4:1-6).

The task of the apostles was primarily to preach and often miracles accompanied their work (1 Cor 1:17; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12). Conducting baptisms was not a priority for apostles.

Suffering is a part of being an apostle (1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:7-12; 11:23-29).

The apostles were stewards of the “mysteries of God,” which they revealed in their ministry (1 Cor 4:1; 15:51-57; Eph 3:1-6; 6:19).

Paul appears to understand the term “apostolos” to include a wider group of apostles than the Twelve. While the term “apostolos” is not used, some scholars believe that “the Seventy” or “Seventy-Two,” mentioned in Luke 10:1-24, is an implied example of this wider group of apostles. However, these men could have been messengers preparing the towns that Jesus had planned to visit. Whether these men were truly apostles, the Bible is not clear.

With the exception of Luke 11:49 and Acts 14:14, Luke applies the term “apostolos” expressly to the “Twelve” disciples.

Luke states that the Twelve had been called to their office (Luke 6:13), had been with Jesus throughout His ministry and had the best knowledge of what He said.

The risen Lord met with them (Luke 24:36-43; Acts 1:1-3).

Before the Ascension, they received the promise of the Spirit (Acts 1:4).

They were made bearers of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-38).

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Luke largely considered the Twelve as the authorities of early Christianity who safeguarded the theological doctrine set forth by Jesus.

The Apostles replaced Judas Iscariot with the election of Matthias (Acts 1:13-26).

The Apostles commissioned the Seven (Acts 6:1-6).

The Apostles made and confirmed important church decisions (Acts 15:1-29).

Paul and Luke seem to differ about who makes up the group of "apostolos." This confusion can be seen in the following:

While Luke considers the apostles as the Twelve, he does use the term "apostolos" in one instance to refer to Barnabas and Paul both of whom are not of the Twelve (Luke 14:14).

With the exception of Matthew 10:2 and Mark 6:30, the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark and John) do not use the term "apostolos" to refer to the Twelve. This observation may not be significant as all four gospels give accounts of the call of the disciples to a special appointment (Matt 10:1-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:12-16; John 6:60-70) and are sent as witnesses of the risen Jesus Christ (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23).

Paul implied a wider group of apostles including himself which he explicitly affirmed on fourteen occasions.

Revelations 21:14 explicitly identifies the Twelve as the apostles.

In an attempt to answer the question of who constituted an apostle, academic theologians have sought to historically reconstruct how the Twelve Disciples became known as the Twelve Apostles. Despite a variety of theories that have been put forth, the conclusions are not clear.

In general, it is hypothesized that after Paul, the Twelve became more regarded as the only legitimate bearers of the message of Jesus Christ, and over time, the title of apostle was confined to the twelve disciples.

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Examine some of the similarities and differences between apostles and disciples:

Characteristic	Apostle of Jesus Christ	Disciple
Genuine belief in Jesus Christ and His words	yes	yes
Accepted the call from the tangibly present Jesus Christ Or from the tangibly present resurrected Lord	yes	no
Given the gift of the Holy Spirit	yes	yes
Focused on preaching and teaching	yes	no
Focused on learning	no	no
Lifelong itinerate service and hardship	yes	no
Steward of the mysteries of God	yes	no
Serving Jesus Christ	yes	yes
Judges the 12 tribes of Israel in the end times	Just the Twelve	no

The fate of the 12 Apostles comes from a variety of ancient traditions. While traditions are very difficult to prove, some have compelling circumstantial evidence to support them.

Simon Peter	Crucified in Rome in 64 A.D. or 67 A.D.
James (the Greater)	Beheaded in Jerusalem, 44 A.D.
John, brother of James (the Greater)	Died a natural death in Ephesus (Greece), 100 A.D. Note: John was assigned the task of caring for Jesus' mother (John 19:26-27).
Andrew, brother of Simon Peter	Crucified in Patras (Greece)
Philip	Crucified in Phrygia (Turkey), 54 A.D.
Thomas	Stoned and slain with a lance in Mylapore (India), 72 A.D.
Bartholomew	Crucified in Albanopolis (Armenia)
Matthew	Slain with a halberd in Nadabah (Ethiopia), 60 A.D.
James (of Alphaeus)	Crucified in Ostrachina (Egypt)
Simon (the Zealot)	Crucified or hacked to death in Suanis (Persia)
Jude (Thaddeus)	Beaten and beheaded in Suanis (Persia)
Matthias	His violent death is placed in Ethiopia, Colchis (Georgia) or Jerusalem

References:

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3. Mounce MD, ed., *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (2006).