

ARE THERE STILL APOSTLES AND PROPHETS TODAY?

By Denver Cheddie

There are people today who claim to be apostles and prophets and actually add these titles to their names. They claim that the 5 fold ministry has been restored. Does the Bible teach that apostles and prophets are to be expected today or were they specifically for the early church? If they were for the early church only, then what do we conclude of the above mentioned persons? Misguided souls or seducers?

Apostles

Definition

The word apostle means ambassador, someone who was sent on behalf of another for a specific purpose. The one sent usually carried the full authority of the sender. Those sent by God with His message were apostles.

Description

The word apostle is used in different ways in the NT. Sometimes it refers to a special group of people who held the office of the apostle (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4: 11). An examination of the Bible reveals a clear distinctness with the original 12, and later, Matthias (Acts 1:26). They were granted special rewards in the New Jerusalem (Matt. 19:28; Rev. 21:14) that no one else

could attain. Clearly these 12 apostles were unique. But there were also other apostles who were commissioned by Christ, Paul being the most noteworthy. In 1 Cor. 15:7, 9 Paul indicates that one of the criteria for being an apostle was to have seen Jesus and been personally commissioned by Him. This was true of the 12 and also Paul. I refer to these as the major apostles.

More broadly, those who worked with these major apostles were also called (minor) apostles. e.g. Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:6).

Function

Ephesians 2:20

having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone

Contrary to popular opinion the apostles' job was not to plant churches. This fell under their jurisdiction but was not their primary role. Their main function was to establish the faith. Jesus Christ died once and for all to become the chief cornerstone of the Christian faith (Eph. 2:20). The purpose of the apostles was to establish the faith and build a doctrinal foundation for which the church would be based. They were specially commissioned by God to do this. In John 14:26; 16:12-14, Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come and reveal to them what they needed to know for this very purpose. In an indirect sense these verses apply to all of us, in that the Holy Spirit teaches us how to apply God's Word (already written) and brings it to our remembrance. But these words were directly spoken to the apostles who physically heard Jesus. This promise was fulfilled when the apostles wrote what Jesus said and what was yet to be said (e.g. 1 Cor.

7:10, 12). Thus it was important for them to have physically seen Him. Later on Paul was commissioned as an apostle to the Gentiles in the same way Peter was apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:7).

Every book in the NT was written by an apostle or a close associate of the apostles. To state it loosely, their primary work was to give us the NT writings. Jesus gave us the New Testament (covenant) through His blood, the apostles gave us the New Testament doctrine through their writings and teachings. This is the meaning of Eph. 2:20. Once that foundation has already been laid (Jude 3), it is time to build on it. The foundation does not have to be laid again, anymore than Christ has to die again. Therefore there is no need for apostles today. Now it is time for pastors, evangelists and teachers to build. 1 Cor. 3:5-10 illustrate the difference between an apostle and a teacher. Paul laid the foundation, Apollos built on it.

Thus in the primary sense there are no more apostles. However people who establish churches, heads of denominations etc. may call themselves apostles, they just cannot claim to be infallibly sent by God to bring new revelation to the body of Christ, as were the major apostles of the Bible. Paul's writings were infallible (1 Cor. 2:13; 14:37; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16 cf. 2 Pet 3:15, 16 where Peter placed Paul's writing on the same level as the Old Testament).

Prophets

Definition

A prophet was someone who spoke authoritatively on behalf of God. Their message usually consisted of present exhortation or warning based on future prediction.

Description

In the OT prophets were God's means of communicating to the people. They did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit, so they needed revelation via 3rd party. Although prophets are given to the church, NT prophets were different from the OT prophets. Much of the writings of OT prophets were canonical (they became scripture). In the NT, there is canonical prophesy, although to a lesser extent than in the OT, as well as non-canonical prophesy. The book of Revelation is an example of canonical prophesy. Agabus' 2 prophesies (Acts 11:28; 21:10) and those given in the Corinthian church were non canonical in that they were not as binding on believers as scripture. Thus Paul chose not to take heed to one of Agabus' prophesies* (Acts 21: 13, 14). Non-canonical prophesy is directed to specific groups of people or congregations under certain circumstances. It does not apply to all believers of all time. Let it be said though that both, if genuine, are God's words.

The office of the prophet is not to be confused with the gift of prophesy which is available to all believers (1 Cor. 14:5). In a sense they may be loosely called prophets without holding the office. All genuine prophesy is authoritative but not necessarily canonical. Once the canon of scripture has been closed, canonical prophesy has ceased. Eph. 2:20 has in mind all prophetic and apostolic work that constituted the doctrinal foundation of the

church (cf. Eph. 3:5). This included the OT prophets, NT apostles and some NT prophets. 2 Pet. 3:2 seems to say that the apostles were to the early church what the prophets were to ancient Israel. I believe that there may still be prophets of the caliber of Agabus, and those who minister with the gift of prophesy (congregational vs. canonical).

Conclusion

There may still be apostles as church planters and heads of denominations. There may still be non-canonical prophets like Agabus and those in the Corinthian church. There are no longer prophets like John the revelator, Moses or Elijah, neither are there apostles like Paul and Peter. Their work is finished. The only other kind of apostles and prophets the bible speaks about are false ones. Their work has never ceased. Without calling names I believe that there are many of them today, even in the church (Acts 20:30). What the church needs today is evangelists, pastors and teachers as well as laymen to build on the foundation already laid and to contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

* It is possible that what Paul disobeyed was not the prophecy, but the plea of the people who heard the prophecy for him not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21: 12). God most likely gave that prophecy to Paul as a **confirmation** of what was already revealed to him personally (Acts 20:23) rather than a **directive**.

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