

JUST WHAT IS AN APOSTLE?

What does the word apostle conjure up in your mind when you hear it? If someone claimed to be an apostle what criteria would you use to measure that person's claim and determine whether they were a true apostle or not?

What criteria would you use? Would you limit the office of an apostle to just the original 12? Would you limit apostles to those of the first century or would you contend that there have been or could be apostles in this era of the church?

In this article I would like to ask and answer the question "Just what is an apostle". What is an apostle and what are some common traits of this job title that we can find in the Bible?

First of all, where does the word "apostle" come from. The word apostle is a Greek word that means "one who is sent". It was used in the secular Greek word. The Jewish Encyclopedia indicates that it was probably first used in a religious context in the Temple administration for the "apostoli" who were sent by the High Priest to collect the temple tax. It later appears in the early church of God as one of the ministerial offices noted in **Ephesians 4**.

The meaning of the word "one who is sent" actually gives us some clues about the subject of what an apostle is. If one is sent, he clearly must be sent by someone, he must be sent to someone or some group of people and he must be sent to do something.

Let's notice one example of this over in **1 Corinthians 1:17**. In this verse the apostle Paul writes: "Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words..." An apostle is someone who is sent to preach the gospel. The "who" the apostle is sent to varies from apostle to apostle. Some like Paul were sent to the Gentiles while others were sent to the House of Israel.

As far as the way that the Bible uses the term an apostle is someone sent by God to a group of people to preach the gospel.

Paul in **Hebrews 3:1** even refers to Jesus as an Apostle. Let us notice who Jesus was sent to over in **Matthew 15:24** if you'd like to turn there with me. When a Gentile woman asked for a miracle from Him, "He answered and said, I am not sent except to the lost sheep of *the* house of Israel. "

God the Father had sent Him to the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus revealed much foundational truth which He taught His disciples and then sent out the twelve as apostles to teach that foundational truth to the Jews and the Israelites scattered abroad.

The second thing to note in this verse is that Jesus' territory as an Apostle was actually restricted to the House of Israel.

There is the curious incident in **Acts 16** where Paul, an apostle primarily sent to the Gentiles, tried to go into Bithynia on the southern shore of the Black Sea but was hindered by the Holy Spirit. Bithynia happened to be an area primarily settled by Israelites who Peter addressed in the beginning of his first epistle.

Over in the Book of Ephesians Paul writes the following in **Ephesians 2:19-20**: "Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being *the* chief cornerstone."

This verse gives us another common characteristic of an apostle. One of an apostle's primary roles is to lay down foundational bedrock truth. While the apostles preached the whole counsel of God their primary emphasis was more on the trunk of the tree foundational truths which they and others build upon in conveying the truths in the Bible.

When a building of stone is constructed a large cornerstone is laid first. This stone is then used as the single main reference point for the entire structure. In the case of the Church, Jesus Christ – the living Word of God – is clearly that stone. From there the rest of the foundation is laid using the cornerstone as the reference point. Once that foundation is laid the rest of the structure must be aligned to that foundation which, in the case of the church, is primarily laid down by the apostles and the prophets.

As long as the rest of the structure is properly aligned to the foundation then the walls and structure above those foundations will also be aligned and true. It is only by using this simple process that the unity of the building is preserved. It behooves all of us to ensure we follow the revealed foundational truths as passed onto us from God through His apostles.

The general ministry as faithful stewards are then duty bound to align their own teachings carefully with the foundations laid down by the apostles teaching only as they have been taught.

Is the office of apostle limited to the original 12 apostles? A simple search in a concordance will show us that in addition to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, there were at least another three apostles – Barnabas, Jude and James, the brother of Jesus. That gives us a total of at least 16 apostles.

Is the office of apostle limited to just these men of the first century? It is hard to come to a definitive answer to that question but another question we can ask to help us answer that question is "Is it logical that they, in the first century, had 16 men to lay foundational truth and there would not, at least, be one in this era when the church and the world's population is much larger?"

There have been many in the church in this era who have laid claim to being an apostle and it is up to every individual to use the principles of what an apostle is that we have covered to determine the validity of those who make such claims.

Herbert Armstrong led the Worldwide Church of God over 50 years and was used very powerfully by God in reaching the world with the gospel and the Truth of God before the doctrinal apostasy instigated by his successor.

It was the church's published teaching towards the end of his life that he was an apostle due to a combination of factors. The fruits of the growth of the church and the thousands of converted lives from being the truth of God from him prove that he was sent by God to preach the gospel. He even related in *Mystery of the Ages* the early dream his wife had of God having much work for the Armstrongs to do before the return of Christ.

So much of the truth of God had been lost over the centuries that God, beginning with the time of Mr Armstrong's intensive study of the Bible, began to reveal through Mr Armstrong a great amount of foundational truth.

He wrote dozens of books and booklets covering basic foundational truths from *Why Were You Born*, *Mystery of the Ages*, *The Incredible Human Potential*, *The Missing Dimension in Sex* and many others. Who can forget his many sermons on the two trees? His focus was very much on the trunk of the tree foundational truth.

God also used him to reveal much prophetic understanding that had been sealed until the end time as spoken of in the book of Daniel. By happenstance he was even ordained an apostle by the Church of God, Seventh Day amongst the many others that they also ordained.

If he was an apostle that God sent for us in the end time then it behooves all of us to not lightly ignore the teachings, both primary and secondary, that he taught us if we are to be rightly aligned with what God teaches us in the Bible.

There are many other ministers here and there who are making such claims to be an apostle. One minister I knew personally and stayed with many years ago now claims to be an apostle for the 21st century, just as one example.

Like the first century church we will also have to try those who say they are apostles but are not. How do we do this? Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount in speaking about false ministers tells us how:

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits” **(Matthew 7:15-16)**.

Like the first century church we will also have to try those who say they are apostles but are not. To do so we need to understand just what an apostle is.

An apostle is sent by God to a specific group of people to preach the gospel. The only way we will know whether they are sent by God is by the fruits as Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount.

While an apostle preaches the whole counsel of God, it is common to find they focus on laying bedrock foundational truth, often in places where such foundations did not exist before.

May we wisely try those who say they are apostles and may we wisely hold to the foundational truths revealed to us by God through His true apostles.