

The Benefit of True Apostolic Leaders

by David Walker

Using an Internet search engine to find out what's being said about apostles these days is a real eye-opener. Google brings up 1.1 million hits. When you exclude all of the irrelevant web sites dealing with non-church issues (mainly geographical features named "Apostle"), you still have hundreds of thousands of web sites remaining dealing with Christian apostles in some fashion.

The wide spectrum of comments reveals the differing perspective and the outright confusion that exists on this subject. Some web sites list names of people they believe are false apostles. Others, believing that there are no modern day apostles, denounce all "so-called apostles" as heretics. On the other end of the spectrum are apostolic networks that will allow you to register your "apostleship" online. You will then be certified by them, sight unseen, as a legitimate apostolic ministry.

There are many apostolic leadership issues that need thorough biblical exploration. Are there modern day apostles? How does an apostle function? Who qualifies for the title "apostle"? What is the relationship between apostles and local churches? All of these are important questions that need to be understood in light of scripture. For more complete treatment of this subject please read Bill Scheidler's excellent book "Apostles, the Fathering Servant".

In light of all the commotion and confusion surrounding the apostolic ministry, we need a solid biblical stance that avoids the extremes running through the church today.

If, as we believe, there are modern-day apostles, how do we recognize them? How do we make sure we are seeing the real thing? How do we avoid being led astray by pseudo-apostles, self-appointed ministries who are seeking only to build their sphere of influence? Fortunately, the Bible gives us good guidelines for testing apostles.

The Right and Responsibility of Testing Leadership

Notice the implied principle that surfaces at the mention of the term "testing apostles". Some might say, "Apostles are in charge, what right do you have to make them measure up to your standards?"

In response, I believe that there are biblical standards by which all leadership, even apostolic leadership, must be measured. In fact, the church at Ephesus was commended by the Lord in Revelation 2:2 because they had tested those who claimed to be apostles and rejected their spurious claims. The implication here is that the local church has the responsibility to test those who claim to be apostles, and finding them to be false, have the right to reject their leadership. The church is under no obligation to accept authority that fails the test.

The prophet Jeremiah warned that God's people who fail to hold leadership to biblical accountability will fall under His judgment. *"Shall I not punish these people?" declares the LORD, "On a nation such as this shall I not avenge Myself? An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!"* (Jer. 5:29-31 NIV)

God's judgment is not going to fall only on errant leadership. It will fall on "people who love to have it so" as well. Isaiah points out the same thing. He indicates that when God judges the land with barrenness *"it will be the same for priest as for the people"* (Isaiah 24:1, 2 NASB). That means that people who follow unbiblical leadership will not prosper.

The people have the right and responsibility to test leadership to see that it conforms to biblical norms and to reject it if it does not. If they are willing to make such judgments the Lord will commend them. If they do not it may lead to barrenness and hardship.

These verses are not talking about having a critical spirit and a hard heart that refuses to follow godly leaders. They are referring to disqualified leaders and the people who keep them in place.

This sounds very ominous and foreboding, but consider the flip side. The local church is positioned for success when its elder leadership protects the church from external leaders operating on their own authority who attempt mislead and misfeed the flock. The church is blessed, the people are fed and cared for and they have a glorious future when godly leadership is in place...and the people love to have it so!

The Biblical Marks of an Apostle

There are many distinguishing characteristics that marked the apostles in the Bible. These same marks should be present in modern day apostles. Some of the marks are also present in those not called to apostolic leadership, so they can't be relied upon as conclusive evidence in themselves. For example, two of the most often mentioned marks of an apostle, the working of miracles and being sent out, can be said of others who were not called to apostolic leadership. So what are the unique marks of an apostle?

Again I refer you to *Apostles: the Fathering Servant* for a more thorough examination of all the qualifications and characteristics of an apostle, but let me make two observations. **First**, children are necessary for both fatherhood and apostleship. A person may be an effective leader, they may have sound character, they may be gifted and talented, they may be a mentor to others, they may be kind and generous, but they are not fathers until they have children. **Second**, apostles operate under authority. Because they do, they carry authority. But, the way they function in authority marks them as true scriptural apostles as opposed to self-appointed, self-promoting personal kingdom builders.

Spiritual Fatherhood

Paul said, *“For even if you were to have ten thousand spiritual instructors--for all that you could not have several fathers. It is I who in Christ Jesus became your father through the Good News”* (Wey). The word “instructors” is translated various ways in other translations of the Bible. It is translated as “guardians”, “tutors”, “teachers”, “guides”, “leaders” and “child-conductors”. Instructors, tutors and teachers have students under their oversight. “Child-conductors” have wards under their care. “Leaders” and “guides” have followers. But, only fathers have children. One irrefutable mark of apostleship is being the spiritual father to spiritual children. Others may instruct, tutor, guard, teach, lead and guide, but no one else can be the father of his children.

Have you ever noticed that you can sometimes learn much about parents by watching their children? In the same way you can learn much about an apostle by watching their spiritual offspring. Who are the children of apostles? Apostles are fathers to those who establish and lead churches. The successful founding and establishing of the churches by leaders under apostolic covering and influence becomes the seal of apostleship. Just as you see the proof of effective parenting when you watch how children behave, you see the proof of apostleship when you see their children establish successful, bible-based, city-impacting churches.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:2, *“If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”* Paraphrased, he is saying, “your existence marks me as an apostle, a spiritual father”. In short, apostles have children, not merely followers.

Spiritual Authority

Perhaps the most contentious issue in today's climate of apostolic renewal is apostolic authority. Framed in the words of one Christian writer, the question regarding apostolic authority seems to be, “Is it in the final analysis, executive or advisory? Can the apostle overrule local church leaders, or does he have to settle for expressing an opinion and leaving the final decision to the local men?”

In I Corinthians Paul certainly seems to deal with the problem of incest among church members in a way that is clearly executive. He makes no mention of the resident Corinthian eldership. Rather, he states what must be done in no uncertain terms. Does this mean that he takes an executive leadership role in the church at Corinth? I think not.

Instead, consider natural fatherhood. The authority level and style is more directive when children are immature. The goal of directive fathering and leadership is to shape children to make decisions on their own. No normal father wants to make decisions for his mature children. But, he loves it when his kids think enough of his wisdom and experience to ask his advice!

In addition, Paul is very careful to make a distinction between the times he is speaking for the Lord and the times when he is sharing his preferences and counsel. See the difference between 1 Corinthians 7:10 and 7:12.

To understand true apostolic authority, considers the contrast between these couplets:

- institutional versus inspirational;
- positional versus relational;
- imposed versus invited.

True apostolic authority is borne out of years of hard work, heartache and tears. It takes sacrificial labor that doesn't pay off quickly. It is not nearly as efficient as institutional leadership. True apostolic authority is shown by serving others. It is self-sacrificing and life-giving. Reading the Apostle Paul's description of his travels illustrates the both cost of his apostleship and the determination of an apostle to sacrifice his own life and well being for the sake of building the church.

Apostolic authority which is imposed on others, is based on a title or a position and is used to maintain the power structure of those in charge is unsound and should be rejected. True apostolic authority is invited, is based on relationship and is used to inspire and motivate to excellence.

What a great benefit to the church when the apostolic ministry is in place and fully functioning! We have a snapshot of what that looks like in Acts 2. There we find this description of a healthy church:

“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

(Acts 2:41-47 NASB)

What is the church like when its apostolic leadership is in place? The church is growing, people are being baptized, they are loving each other and reaching the surrounding city with the gospel. Thank God for the restoration of true spiritual fathers who bring great grace to the church!