

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (30-1-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The Apostles

Acts 1:2-8

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 1:15-26;

John 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Introduction

We are going to consider the events in the forty-day period between the Resurrection and the Ascension, and in particular to concentrate on the Apostles, who they were, the instructions they were given and the equipment they received. All that we know about the Lord, His importance and His teaching, has come to us through the reporters, the Apostles, who were used by the Holy Spirit to convey the truths to us. Therefore it is important to ask who they were, what was their place in the Lord's strategy, why should their teaching be taken seriously, and what was their authority.

The meaning of Apostle

The Greek word *αποστολος* is used in three ways in the New Testament. Only one of these is of special interest. The term is used for all Christians in John 13:16, **A servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.** In a general sense, we are all sent into the world by Christ. The second use is in reference to messengers sent on special errands from one church to another. **Our brethren are messengers of the churches** (2 Corinthians 8:23), and **Epaphroditus, your messenger** (Philippians 2:25). But the third sense is the one which applies to this special group of men in the church, mentioned heading the lists in 1 Corinthians 12:28,29 and Ephesians 4:11, men who were given the special gift of being apostles.

This group consisted of the twelve apostles (as in Acts 1) (c.f. Luke 6:12,13), Paul (Galatians 1:1), James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:4,14), Andronicus and Junias (Romans 16:7), Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 2:1). These men were the special leaders, official teachers, preachers, administrators, leaders in worship, discipline, and oversight over the scattered groups of believers, who mediated the gift of the Holy Spirit at special times, and church planters. They also had special powers of healing and exorcism, and took the lead in dealing with particular problems vexing the church. With the prophets, these Apostles were the foundation of the church. The church was built on their ministry and their teaching.

They were a unique group of men who were uniquely equipped for their task. Luke outlines four stages.

God chose them

The Apostles had been chosen (Acts 1:2), *εκλεγομαι*. Luke earlier used this word about the calling of the twelve disciples, whom he also named apostles (Luke 6:13). See John 15:16, **You did not choose me but I chose you.** To fill the vacancy created by Judas, **O Lord, show which of these two you have chosen** (Acts 1:24). The risen Lord described Paul as **My chosen vessel** (Acts 9:15). **The God of our fathers has chosen you... you will be his witnesses** (Acts 22:14).

It is important to recognise that the Apostles were not appointed by themselves, or by another man, or church committee. They were personally and directly appointed by Christ Himself. Paul was aware of his special position when he wrote, **Paul, an apostle, not from men or through men but through Jesus Christ and God the Father** (Galatians 1:1). **Called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel** (Romans 1:1). They were all apostles, not because they wanted to be or because someone else wanted them to be, but because God wanted them to be.

Jesus showed them Himself

Jesus appointed twelve that they might be with Him (Mark 3:14) and therefore uniquely qualified to bear witness to Him. They were the foundation witnesses of the church because they had been eyewitnesses. When choosing a successor to Judas who had committed suicide, Peter insisted he had to have been with the Twelve from John's baptism until the ascension (Acts 1:21,22). In particular, he had to be a witness of the Resurrection.

Hence Jesus had showed Himself to these men after His Resurrection. He had provided them personally with infallible convincing proof that He was alive. He kept doing this over the forty days – appearing to them, speaking to them about the Kingdom, eating with them. They knew He was no ghost. He had invited them to touch Him, revealing Himself to all their senses.

Similarly Paul claimed, **am I not an Apostle... have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord** (1 Corinthians 9:1). In 1 Corinthians 15 he gives a list of resurrection appearances. He was seen by James, then all the other Apostles, and finally Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:7,8). They were all eyewitnesses, who had spoken to Jesus, and heard Him proclaim He was alive. Their experience was first-hand. This was an indispensable requirement for apostleship.

They were personally taught and commissioned by Jesus

During the forty day period Jesus taught them about the Kingdom, i.e. God's saving rule which had come in teaching, miracles and especially in the death and Resurrection of Christ. He gave them instructions by the Holy Spirit. He opened the Old Testament to them, showing how He had fulfilled the prophecies in His life, death and resurrection. He told them they had to go to all nations and preach repentance and faith (Luke 24:47).

Then in Acts 1:8 He repeated this in saying they had to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee and the utmost ends of the earth. They were to be His ambassadors, the Lord's reporters and delegates, bearing His message and carrying His authority and speaking in His name. Their job was to evangelise, teach converts, found churches, work miracles, lead worship, discipline, and have oversight of the growing churches.

Jesus promised them the Holy Spirit

They were going to receive the special gift of the baptism of the Holy Spirit soon after Jesus' Ascension. John 14:26, John 16:12ff, the Upper Room discourse – told that the

Holy Spirit would teach them all things, help them to remember all He had said, guide them into all truth, reveal to them things that were yet to happen. They had to wait in Jerusalem to receive this gift, and it would take place soon. They would be clothed with divine power and be able to carry out the Lord's commission and undertake effectively all the work He had for them.

Relevance to our present position

Let us be quite clear, therefore, that the role of Apostles was unique, and the office has come to an end. The Apostles had no successors. No one today can be an apostle in the sense of the leaders of the early church. People do use the term in certain churches, but only true in a secondary sense – the sense of being sent out by the Lord to preach the Gospel.

But the term is so easily misunderstood, and there is danger of people who have been called “apostles” claiming to have special revelations from the Holy Spirit, as an extension to their ministry. There is danger here; hence we must not lose sight of the uniqueness of the New Testament Apostles and their revelation.

Then beware of those claiming “apostolic succession”, e.g. Bishops in the Roman Catholic or High Anglican churches. They trace their authority back to the Apostles through the laying on of hands, and claim the Apostles have transmitted to the Bishop his authority. They maintain that sacramental grace is conveyed through the practice of laying on of hands. Any minister not ordained by the Bishop has a defective ministry.

But there is no evidence in the New Testament to back this up. Indeed the idea was not around in the first two centuries of the Christian era. John Wesley said, “The uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable which no man ever did or can prove.” And what about the bishops who claim to have apostolic succession but who reject apostolic teaching?

The place where we find the apostolic teaching today is in the New Testament; therefore it is the real successor to the Apostles. A truly apostolic church is one which is obedient to the teaching of the Apostles in the New Testament, not one whose leader has been ordained by a bishop claiming to be a successor of the Apostles.

There are 27 books in our New Testament. This matter was not settled till 367AD, and several criteria were used to judge which books should be included in the canon. But the main one was apostolic authorship, or from those in the apostolic circle. The authors had to have apostolic authority and endorsement. So we submit to the teaching of the Lord through those personally called, qualified and equipped when we bow to the authority of the New Testament. We can be sure we know the mind of Christ through His special reporters with special endowment and teaching of the Holy Spirit when we accept the teaching we find in the New Testament.

Finally note that this apostolic teaching is all that we need. It is not only necessary, but also sufficient. **All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work** (2 Timothy 3:16,17). The Greek word

αρτιος, translated “thoroughly equipped”, means perfect, complete, in need of nothing, thoroughly finished or supplied for every good work. The New Testament with the Old Testament is sufficient on its own to direct and guide us. Hence no need to add traditions of the church, or councils, and various interpretations.

Here we see one of the main differences between evangelical Christians and the Roman Catholic Church, or cults like the Mormons, which all add other things to the Bible. Neither do evangelical Christians accept as authoritative any alleged inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which in any way adds to the teaching of the Bible. Those who claim that the Bible is not a sufficient guide on matters of faith and conduct are in error.

Roman Catholicism has not only the Bible, but also church tradition, and decrees of councils and popes. All the things that are distinctive in Roman Catholicism – penance, purgatory, Mary’s immaculate conception – are all additions to the Bible. Because they claim revelation from God is still continuing, many more things can be added in the future to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Mormons have the Book of Mormon in addition to the Bible, the supposed revelation to Joseph Smith. The Jehovah’s Witness’s “Watch Tower” is said to be authored by God. The Christian Science movement has been described as “Revelation of truth for this age”. Some charismatics say there are additional revelations today through prophecies, visions and tongues.

We need to **contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints** (Jude 1:3). Insist on the uniqueness of Scripture. God’s Word is our only basis for authority. Be wary of emphasis on people’s experience as source of authority, rather than scripture. Do not surrender to anything which adds to the authority of Scripture. Do not compromise. The Apostles were God’s special chosen reporters, and their teaching, and their teaching alone, is the foundation of our belief.